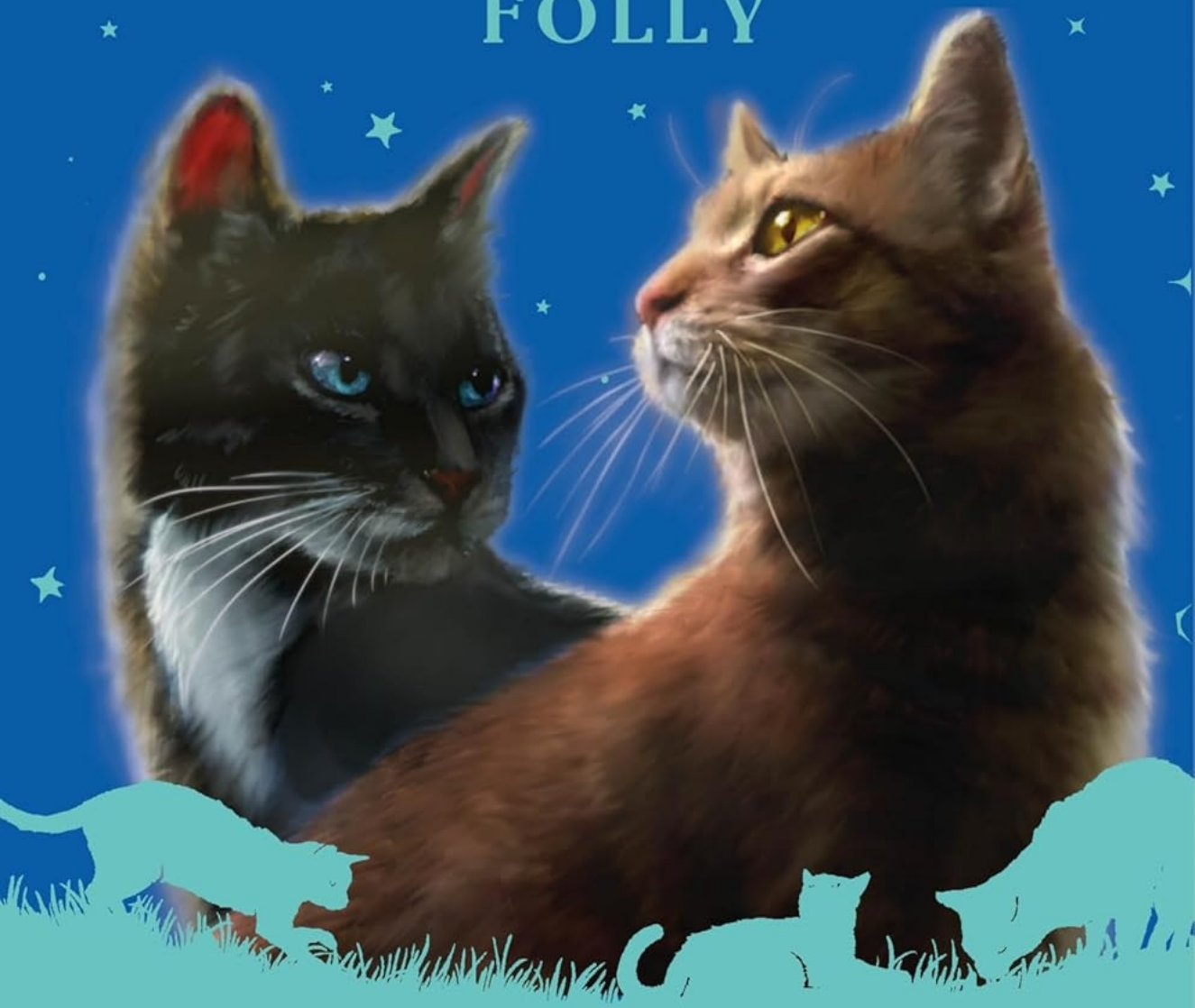
WARRIORS

SUPER EDITION

STORMCLAN'S FOLLY



ERIN HUNTER

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A FORBIDDEN DREAM. A CLAN IN PERIL.

Stripestar has always imagined a life beyond the forest, but, as leader of ThunderClan, he knows that his duty to his Clanmates comes first. When tragedy strikes and WindClan's leader, Galestar, approaches with an offer of allyship, Stripestar swiftly accepts. But he and Galestar have history, a connection that only deepens as they continue to work together.

Galestar loves being a WindClan cat, but her relationship with Stripestar makes her question the strict warrior code that forbids them from being mates. Determined to build a family together, she and Stripestar decide to combine their Clans into one: StormClan. However, StarClan casts them out for breaking with tradition.

Stripestar and Galestar decide to seek new land for their Clan, but they are soon faced with the reality of life without StarClan's guidance. Cast down a path of peril, loss, and despair, the cats must face the consequences of their actions, which will echo for generations to come.

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ERIN HUNTER

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First Edition

For Ida and Arthur

Special thanks to Conrad Mason

ALLEGIANCES

WINDCLAN

LEADER

GALESTAR—black-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

DEPUTY

PEBBLENOSE—fluffy gray tom with yellow eyes

MEDICINE CATS

GOLDENLEAF—gray-and-white she-cat with golden eyes

WARRIORS

(toms and she-cats without kits)

THRUSHCALL—dark brown tabby tom

HUNTHEART—large black-and-white tom

ICEFOOT—wiry brown she-cat

CROWFLIGHT—tawny she-cat with blue eyes

BERRYFALL—calico she-cat

MUDSPLASH—dark brown tom

PEAKTAIL—burly, gray-striped tom

HAREWHISKER—gray-and-white tom

FLASH—gray tabby tom

WHITEBREEZE—gray-and-white she-cat

SWIFTWING—black tom

PETALSTEP—white she-cat

APPRENTICE, HAREPAW (a gray tabby tom)

SPOTNOSE—black-and-white she-cat

ELDERS

(former warriors and queens, now retired)

GUSTWHISKER—black-and-white tom

DUSTFLOWER—brown she-cat

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER

STRIPESTAR—brown tabby tom with amber eyes

DEPUTY

TINYCLAW—large ginger-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

MEDICINE CATS

KESTRELWING—elderly, dark brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

STONEFLOWER—ginger tom

WARRIORS

FOGDRIFT—smoke-gray she-cat

FERNWHISPER—tawny she-cat with yellow eyes

GRASSFOOT—sleek black tom

TUMBLETAIL—large black tom

ROUGHPELT—gray-and-white tom

HAZELFROND—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

ROSEBUSH—plump ginger tom

APPRENTICE, OWLPAW (an orange tabby tom)

WHITESTEP—long-furred white she-cat with green eyes

FRECKLEPELT—dappled white she-cat

BIRDFLIGHT—light brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

SPOTTEDPELT—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

GORSECLAW—dark brown tabby tom

FAWNPELT—pale brown she-cat

NETTLESTING—calico she-cat

QUEENS — **ALDERBRANCH**—black she-cat (mother to Palekit, a pale gray she-kit, and Songkit, a black-and-white tomkit)

ELDERS — **YARROWFLIGHT**—brown tabby tom

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER — **SNAKESTAR**—brown tom with yellow eyes

DEPUTY — **RAVENCRY**—black she-cat

MEDICINE CATS — **PINEBRUSH**—white she-cat with blue eyes

MOLEPELT—black tom with green eyes

WARRIORS — **GRAYTAIL**—dark gray tom

APPRENTICE, THORNPAW (a light brown tom)

RIVERCLAN

LEADER — **BIRCHSTAR**—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

DEPUTY — **FLOATWEED**—black and white tom

MEDICINE CATS — **SHINEFLOWER**—pale yellow she-cat

OVERLOOK
WATERFALL
THUNDERPATH
HOLLOW TREE
TWOLEGPLACE
FOX-HEAD
MOUNTAIN
ROCKY HILL
THUN
TWOLEG
GREENLEAFPLACE
TWOLEGPLACE
SUN-DROWN-WATER
STORMCLAN'S
JOURNEY

WILDCATS' CAMP
CAVE
N
W
E
S
SISTERS' CAMP
ERPATH
SLATE & BEACH'S CAMP
TWOLEG DEN
MOONPOOL
HIGHSTONES

PROLOGUE

The sun shone down from a clear blue sky, as it always did in the eternal hunting grounds. A cool breeze tempered the green-leaf warmth, swayed the long grass of the meadow, and ruffled Stripestar's pelt like a gentle paw.

Stripestar lifted his head high, whiskers quivering as he strolled, savoring the rich scents of meadow flowers, damp earth, and a distant waft of prey that made his mouth water. The grass was so green! So soft underpaw! It was all just as he remembered.

A river shimmered up ahead, a coiling band of silver that split the meadow in two, and waiting for him on the bank was a sleek black-and-white she-cat, her blue eyes sparkling in the sunlight that reflected off the water.

Stripestar's heart skipped a beat at the sight of her. Had she really come to visit him again, and so soon? He felt his pelt prickle with unease. Those crystal-clear eyes were so familiar, but in them was something . . . unknown. At their last meeting she had hissed and growled at him. Was this truly the same Galestar? His dear mate, and the cat he had loved more than any other?

She has changed. Just as I have.

When he reached the bank, Stripestar dipped a cautious paw into the water, watching the ripples spread across the glassy surface. The river ran all the way to the hunting grounds of the wildcats, where Galestar had found her peace at last.

"You've come a long way," he purred softly.

Galestar heaved a deep sigh. "I have been thinking of you . . . ," she murmured. "And I knew that I had to see you again."

"I am glad of it." Stripestar swished his tail. He felt like an awkward kit, butterflies dancing in his belly. "I think of you often," he admitted. "Always."

Galestar watched him carefully, a strange look in her eyes. For a while she was silent. "I found happiness after you left," she told him, at last. "But I have always wondered . . . what if things had gone differently?"

"If there had been no storm," purred Stripestar.

"No." Galestar shook her head. "It wasn't only the storm. We both know that, Stripestar. When did it all change between us? What happened?"

Stripestar looked away. "I made . . . so many mistakes. If only I could have known then what I know now. . . ." He trailed off, then glanced up sharply, met her shining eyes with his own. "But the worst mistake of all was letting you slip away from me."

"Stripestar—"

"I was so sure I was doing the right thing!" He pounded the earth with his forepaws, aching with frustration. *She's so close—yet so far away.* And now all the feelings he'd thought he had overcome were rising up inside him. "Joining our Clans

together. Leaving the forest and striking out on our own, just so we could be together. It was the only thing I wanted! But it was wrong. It was all wrong. And it was all my fault."

"Stripestar." The softness in her voice made him tremble from head to tail. "*We* made those decisions. *Together.* No cat knew how it would all turn out." She hesitated. "I was angry when we last met, but now . . . I don't know. After everything that happened, I never dreamed I would see you here."

"Neither did I," whispered Stripestar. "And I could hardly bear it."

He looked down, trying to summon the courage to ask the question that remained in his heart. He was so afraid to hear the answer. But he looked up at last and asked it anyway.

"Galestar," he mewed. "Tell me the truth. If we had the chance to do it all again—would you?"

Galestar's silence lasted an eternity. She stared into the distance, her tail twitching as it always did when she considered something of importance.

When she replied, she would not meet his eyes. "Would *you?*"

Stripestar sighed. "I do not know," he confessed.

Another silence stretched between them. Once more, Stripestar found himself casting his mind back to the distant past, to the events that even StarClan had forgotten, but that he never could.

Galestar . . . it all began with her.

His soul stirred as he thought of the moonlit night when he had first met her, so many seasons past.

The night of the Gathering.

Chapter 1

Beneath the branches of the four great oak trees, silver moonlight shifted across the leaf litter. Galepaw crouched, every muscle tensed, as though she were about to pounce on some unfortunate prey scuffling in the undergrowth. But this was no hunt.

She licked her lips, ears flattened with worry as the Gathering bickered all around her. The hollow was full of cats from every Clan. *No,* she reminded herself. *Not every Clan.*

"Silence! All of you!" Gazing over the crowd from the Great Rock, Swiftstar held his head high, calling for order. The big dark tom who led WindClan arched his back, seeming to fix his gaze on each cat in turn until the whole Gathering fell into an uneasy stillness.

Galepaw shivered, not only from the cool night air. She nuzzled close to her littermate, Crowpaw, who stood firm at her side. Even their mother, Ripplegrass, looked anxious, which did little to ease Galepaw's own nerves. Crowpaw looked calm, at least—until Galepaw noticed the restless flicking of the tawny she-cat's tail.

Satisfied, Swiftstar sat back on his haunches. "We cannot go on like this," he announced. "Twelve moons have passed,

and SkyClan has still not returned. It is time to face the truth—they never will."

More mutters and yowling swept through the Gathering.

"We should be ashamed of ourselves!" a pale-furred ThunderClan she-cat meowed.

"StarClan will punish us!" yowled a fearful apprentice of ShadowClan.

"We have betrayed the prophecy of the Blazing Star!" One of the senior warriors of RiverClan looked around with guilty eyes.

Swiftstar raised a paw until every cat had quieted again.

"I speak only what we all know to be true," he continued. "We are *four* Clans now, not five. Some cats may say we brought this upon our own heads. I do not deny what I did when SkyClan came begging for WindClan territory. But what good is it to gaze backward?"

Galepaw noticed WindClan's medicine cat, Larkwing, looking exasperated at their leader's words. *She warned him that StarClan wouldn't look kindly on driving out Cloudstar's Clan,* Galepaw remembered.

"There is only one question left," Swiftstar continued. "What are we to do now?"

The other leaders seemed uncomfortable. Redstar of ThunderClan hung his head, while Birchstar looked away. It was left to the leader of ShadowClan to speak up.

"What are you saying, Swiftstar?" asked Dawnstar, cocking her head.

"Listen." Swiftstar sat up tall, yellow eyes gleaming in the

moonlight as he addressed the whole Gathering. "Every cat in SkyClan may be dead. Consider how many Twolegs have come to the forest! How many monsters! They destroyed SkyClan's territory. Perhaps they destroyed SkyClan, too. But why should they stop there?"

"You speak wisely, Swiftstar," mewed Birchstar before the Gathering could descend into anxious murmurings again. "We are all vulnerable, just as SkyClan was. We should all be afraid." The tabby she-cat who led RiverClan hesitated, ears flattened. "I fear . . . I fear the day may come when we shall all have to leave this forest of ours."

This time there was no stopping the gasps and panicked meowing from the gathered cats.

"That could never happen!"

"Mouse-brain! Of course it could!"

"The Twolegs care nothing for us, or our territory!"

Galepaw shrank back, fur bristling as the grown-up cats argued fiercely on all sides. *Is every Gathering so . . . angry?* She had been excited earlier that night, making her first journey to the hollow under a full moon. Now her heart was thudding with alarm. *All these brave warriors, and no one seems to know what to do!*

She huddled closer to Crowpaw. "Do you think we really will have to leave the forest?" she asked, trying not to let her voice tremble with fear.

"Where would we even go?" added Crowpaw, her big blue eyes wide.

Galepaw could tell her sister was just as horrified by the idea as she was. The forest was all the two of them had ever

known. Now that she thought about it, Galepaw realized that she had never even dreamed of what might lie beyond it. *Surely the trees go on forever and ever!* She knew in her heart it wasn't so—but what else could there be? A barren wasteland, perhaps? At the thought, another shudder ran through her, from head to tail-tip.

Ripplegrass curled her tail fondly around the littermates, gathering them close and giving them each a gentle lick on the ear. "It's not for young apprentices to worry about such matters," she purred softly. "You are not even warriors yet! Besides, nothing has been decided. Leave your elders to their squabbling. And perhaps a drink of water might calm your nerves? We will find you when the Gathering is done."

Galepaw couldn't help noticing that Ripplegrass had not answered their questions. But all the same, relief flooded her at the thought of escaping the strained atmosphere in the hollow.

Crowpaw drew herself up proudly. "I will stay," she said firmly. *She's trying to sound brave,* Galepaw understood, *even if she doesn't feel it.* Crowpaw was skilled at hiding her emotions, but Galepaw had always been bolder than her sister. Even as a little kit, Crowpaw had hardly dared to step outside the nursery without their mother.

After giving Crowpaw a parting nuzzle, Galepaw slunk back toward the shadows.

"Where are you going?" hissed Pebblepaw as she passed. The fluffy gray apprentice stared at her with eager yellow eyes.

"To find a puddle," Galepaw replied. "My throat's dry."

"I could come with you," he suggested.

His friend Thrushpaw snorted and rolled his eyes. "I think Galepaw can find a little water without any help. Or did you want to drink it for her too?"

Pebblepaw hunched over, fluffing up even more in his embarrassment. He was always offering to accompany Galepaw—and Thrushpaw was always teasing him for it.

"I won't be long," Galepaw meowed quickly, hoping to stop Pebblepaw from feeling bad. "Perhaps afterward you could tell me what I missed?"

Pebblepaw nodded vigorously.

Galepaw climbed the slope, then pushed through the bushes that ran all around the hollow and left the clamor of the Gathering behind her.

A chilly breeze cut through her pelt as she emerged into the open. Here and there, moonlight gleamed off puddles left by the recent rains. But she soon found that most of them were shallow, or cloudy with dirt. Flicking her tail in frustration, she was about to turn back when she spotted another cat, head lowered as he drank from a large pool of clear water.

He looked young—an apprentice, just like her—but he was already large and muscled. He stood silhouetted against the night sky, his body dark, but the edges of his brown fur gleamed. A strange shiver ran through Galepaw at the sight of him. Almost without realizing it, she approached.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

The tom looked up, droplets falling from his whiskers. His eyes glittered in a way that made Galepaw feel warm and welcome. "You got kicked out too?" he asked.

"Not exactly." She hesitated, feeling oddly embarrassed.

"It's my first Gathering," she admitted. "I think my mother, Ripplegrass, felt things were getting a little too . . ."

"Yowly?" offered the stranger.

Galepaw let out a snort of laughter. "Yowly," she agreed. "Don't tell any cat," she purred, after a pause.

"Nothing to be ashamed of." The young tom moved aside, letting Galepaw swallow a few gulps of rainwater. "It's my first Gathering too. Though now I'm wondering if it might be our last."

Galepaw's heart sank. "Not you too!"

The tom chuckled. "Well, I don't really think so. Although some of my Clanmates are saying that we never should have let SkyClan leave. They seem convinced that it's the beginning of the end for all Clans. So who knows?"

"And your Clan is . . . ?"

"ThunderClan. I'm Stripepaw. Pleased to meet you."

"Galepaw, from WindClan."

"*Galepaw.* It's a good name." His amber eyes gleamed in the darkness, and a confusing thrill spread through Galepaw—a spike of disappointment that Stripepaw was in a different Clan, and a warm rush as she caught the scent of him, rich with pine needles and bracken.

Galepaw didn't know how long they sat talking beside the pool of water. It felt like forever and the blink of an eye, both at the same time. *And how can it be that I feel so excited, yet so calm?*

". . . besides, even if we did have to leave the forest, how bad could it really be?" Stripepaw was saying.

"Terrible! Awful!" cried Galepaw, opening her eyes wide in mock horror. They both chuckled, and Galepaw couldn't help but marvel at how her fear really was vanishing, like morning dew scorched away by a hot greenleaf sun.

"But really," she added with a frown, "I just can't imagine anything else. I feel so safe here, where the Clans have lived for generations. If we had to leave, who knows what dangers we might run into? We could be prey for hawks or badgers . . . or something even worse."

"You're right," mewed Stripepaw, nodding thoughtfully. "But you're forgetting one thing. What if we leave, and it's *better* than you could ever imagine?"

Galepaw thumped her tail doubtfully.

"Listen," Stripepaw went on, his eyes shining with enthusiasm. "We're only afraid of the world beyond the forest because we've never seen it. But the world is huge! Or so I've heard. There must be other wonderful places to live, where the sun shines even in leaf-bare and the prey runs well each day!"

"And the rabbits are all plump and juicy!" added Galepaw.

"And even the rats taste delicious!" Stripepaw playfully swiped at her, and she rolled clear, her whiskers twitching with happiness.

When was the last time I felt so relaxed? Galepaw wondered. She had been so busy thinking of things that could go wrong, she hadn't stopped to dream of what might go right. *I almost hope we do have to leave!*

"Do you know what I think?" Stripepaw gazed out across the moonlit forest. There was a look of wonder about him. "I

think there must be other cats out there. And not just Clan cats. Cats that look nothing like us!"

Galepaw couldn't hold in a snort of amusement. "Cats with no fur?" she suggested.

To her surprise, Stripepaw only nodded. "Of *course* cats with no fur. And cats who walk around on their hind legs."

"Like Twolegs!" Galepaw sat up beside him, staring out like he was. "How about . . . cats as red as strawberries in greenleaf?"

"Cats that change color! Strawberry-red in greenleaf, apple-green in leaf-fall . . ."

"Ooh! Cats with giant paws! Bad for walking . . ."

". . . but good for catching mice!"

They both rolled around, meowing with laughter until Galepaw's sides ached.

She could hardly believe that just a little while ago she had been almost sick with worry about the future of the Clans. Now here she was, having the best night of her life. *I should thank him for that.* She was about to say something when a cry split the air.

"Five! There must always be five Clans! Have none of you heard of the Blazing Star?"

The cry came from the hollow. Galepaw and Stripepaw looked at each other, and at once the spell was broken. They turned tail and darted back through the bushes, tumbling down the slope and skidding to a halt in the shadows at the rear of the Gathering.

Every cat had turned to listen to a skinny black tom who sat

at the foot of the Great Rock. *Molepelt.* ShadowClan's medicine cat was small and slight, but his voice carried easily across the assembled warriors. "SkyClan made its choice," she was saying. "It is no fault of ours that the Twolegs came and took their territory. Who can blame us for that?"

"Maybe so," mewed another voice. "But we made a choice too—not to share our territory." It was Milkfur who spoke, deputy of WindClan. His pale pelt glowed like the moon itself in the darkened hollow. "We all knew that SkyClan was starving. We knew that they were desperate. And what did we do?" He looked at Seedpelt, ThunderClan's deputy, as though waiting for an answer.

Seedpelt's back arched, her gray fur bristling. "Why ask me, Milkfur?" she hissed.

"Why not? It was Redstar who told SkyClan to leave the forest. If there is to be blame for SkyClan leaving, the fault surely lies with ThunderClan."

A fresh chorus of angry yelps and mews broke out at Milkfur's words, ThunderClan cats clawing the air and spitting with outrage.

"Enough!" Once again, the Gathering quieted at Molepelt's calm voice. "What use is it to point paws? None of us chose to share our territory with SkyClan. Now they are gone, just as Swiftstar says, and we must find a path forward. Some of you believe we should have done more to help SkyClan. But if so, why did StarClan stay silent? They sent no message, no warning to any medicine cat, in any Clan. Perhaps StarClan *meant* for SkyClan to leave the forest."

"Then let us talk of this path forward," mewed Milkfur, before any cat could disagree with Molepelt's words. "Let us talk of what remains of SkyClan's territory, and how ThunderClan has decided to seize it all for themselves!"

This time the uproar was even louder, with cats from every Clan yowling their opinion.

"It's not fair!"

"SkyClan's territory should be split between all the Clans!"

"How dare ThunderClan take it?"

Redstar only shook his head in frustration at the quarrel, but Seedpelt unsheathed her claws and snarled at Milkfur. "The territory is right next to ThunderClan's! Besides, it's barely big enough to be of use to us. What good would it be to WindClan, or to any other Clan?"

Galepaw's heart was sinking all over again.

"They'll never agree on anything!" whispered Stripepaw, echoing her own thoughts. He cast her a shy glance. "You know, I really hope the next time we meet, it won't be in a fight. I . . . really liked talking to you."

Butterflies danced in Galepaw's belly. "Me too. Even if you do smell of trees." She gave him a gentle nudge to make sure he knew that she was joking. "I only wish that . . ." She felt suddenly nervous, without quite knowing why. "I wish that we were apprentices together. Even gathering moss might be fun with a, er . . ."

"Friend?"

"*Friend* like you."

"And spending all day picking ticks out of the elders' pelts? Would *that* be fun?"

Maybe it would, with Stripepaw. Galepaw only hoped the darkness hid her cringe of embarrassment.

They stared at each other, Stripepaw's amber eyes glowing like fireflies in the dark.

"There you are!" The irritable hiss made Galepaw start in surprise. Her mentor, Squirrelbrush, was bustling toward her. "I've been looking all over!" she grumbled.

All at once Galepaw realized that the Gathering had ended, and she hadn't even noticed. Cats were stirring all around, slinking out of the hollow in twos and threes and muttering crossly to one another. *Nothing's been decided,* Galepaw realized. *And every cat is still angry.*

"Come on! We're holding up the Clan," Squirrelbrush complained. She butted Galepaw with her nose, nudging her up the slope to where the shadowy shapes of WindClan were pushing through the bushes.

Galepaw twisted, trying to look over her shoulder. She caught a brief glimpse of Stripepaw being hustled away by his own mentor. The tom cast a quick glance back, and their eyes met one last time before the crowd of cats parted them and they were back with their own Clans.

Back where we belong. Forever.

A flash of sadness ran through her at the thought.

Galepaw was pawsore, limbs heavy with tiredness, by the time they crept back in among the gorse bushes of WindClan's camp.

Most cats were already slinking off to their dens, but she spotted Pebblepaw over by the fresh-kill pile. The fluffy

gray apprentice was tugging out a small vole with his teeth. He pulled it clear and carried it over to a clump of grass to set aside, while Thrushpaw looked on. Thrushpaw seemed strangely thoughtful until he saw Galepaw watching too—then he gave a great roll of his eyes that made her snort with laughter in spite of herself. Luckily, Pebblepaw didn't notice.

Voles were Galepaw's favorite prey, and she had no doubt that the little offering was meant for her. *It's sweet of him. Isn't it?* Pebblepaw was a fine tom, strong and brave and thoughtful. Every cat in WindClan thought so. One day he would make an excellent mate.

Galepaw frowned, trying to imagine a life with Pebblepaw—being his mate, bearing a litter together. But all she could picture was a strong young apprentice from ThunderClan with warm amber eyes and a rich brown pelt.

She couldn't hold in a sigh. She already knew who her mate was going to be . . . and it wasn't a cat from ThunderClan.

CHAPTER 2

Seasons later, a pawful of warriors slipped through the shadows, stalking down the slopes and into the hollow of Fourtrees to join their leader.

Stripestar could feel the tension running through his Clanmates like the heaviness in the air before a storm. His pelt itched from the heat of the greenleaf sun, and the cool darkness beneath the branches of the oaks would have been a welcome relief at any other time.

"Rest a little," he ordered. "Gather your strength for what is to come."

Some of his Clanmates stretched out, panting, while others prowled back and forth, unable to relax. *And no wonder.*

Casting his gaze around the hollow, a familiar memory came to Stripestar: many seasons before, when he had been Stripepaw attending his very first Gathering. That was the night he had met Galepaw for the first time, and they had drunk rainwater and dreamed together of a life beyond the forest.

StarClan! It seemed like a memory from another life entirely. Those apprentices would never have imagined that one

day they would both lead their own Clans. *Or that those Clans might meet in battle.*

"Are you sure about this, Stripestar?"

The voice of his deputy, Tinyclaw, startled Stripestar from his thoughts. The ginger-and-white she-cat was large despite her name, and Stripestar had rarely seen her look rattled by anything. But today her ears were flattened with worry and her tail was twitching restlessly. "It's just . . . we're not at full strength. Perhaps this battle can wait?"

Stripestar considered her words. There was no doubt the Clan was short of warriors. The dens were full to bursting with kits, all needing fresh-kill and protection. He'd been forced to leave some of his best warriors behind to guard the camp, to watch over them. *All the more reason to strike now.*

"We must send WindClan a message," he told Tinyclaw firmly. "If they keep stealing ThunderClan prey, our kits will starve—and our warriors with them. We must attack now, while our warriors still have strength."

Tinyclaw only dipped her head in reply. Stripestar could tell she disagreed but didn't want to challenge him.

"Time to go!" he growled before he could think twice about her warning.

As Stripestar led his warriors up out of the hollow on the far side, a smoke-gray cat slipped alongside him. Stripestar felt relieved to have his mate so close, and for a while they walked silently through the long grass, until Fogdrift spoke.

"WindClan territory," she murmured, nodding at the ground that rose up ahead. "If we keep going, there may be no turning back."

"And why would we turn back?"

Fogdrift hesitated. "I heard what Tinyclaw was saying," she admitted. "I wonder . . . is she right?"

"Not you too!" Stripestar snorted.

"I don't mean it's wrong to fight," Fogdrift added quickly. "But is it a fight we can win right now?"

Stripestar felt his pelt prickling with annoyance. *Twelve moons as leader, and still every cat seems to doubt my decisions!* "Trust me," he growled.

"I do, Stripestar. You know I do." Her words softened him at once, and he had no doubt of their truth. "Listen. If you really believe that this will stop WindClan from hunting on ThunderClan territory, then I'm with you. Just promise me that you aren't doing this to . . . *prove* anything. You've shown the Clan that you are a great leader, time and time again. Even before you actually *were* leader."

Stripestar shook his head in wonder. All his frustration melted away in the warmth of his mate's love.

Once, when they were apprentices, he had been annoyed by Fogpaw always watching him, always telling him to *be careful* or to *look out* or *watch your head.* It had taken him many moons to understand. *She only does it because she loves me.* He couldn't remember when it was that he had come to love her back. His feelings for her had grown slowly, like a new, green sapling. Now, more than anything, he valued her gentle warnings and her concern for the Clan. *And for me.*

"I made a wise decision," he murmured.

"You mean—"

"I mean when I chose you to be my mate." He gently

nuzzled Fogdrift's flank. "I hope I am making another wise decision now. I don't take it lightly, facing WindClan. But we have put off the battle for long enough. We can't let other cats think that ThunderClan does not protect its borders."

"Agreed." Fogdrift nodded with determination. "Well, then. Let's show WindClan what we're made of!" Stripestar felt a sudden surge of affection for her. It was true. *She's with me.*

Tinyclaw pulled up suddenly, whiskers twitching as she scented the air.

"What is it?" asked Stripestar, hackles rising.

"I can smell them," hissed Tinyclaw. "WindClan."

Stripestar caught it too now, a distant waft on the breeze. His pelt prickled with anticipation, and his claws tingled to be unsheathed. "Be ready," he called. "For ThunderClan!"

A stiff breeze flattened the warriors' fur as they crested a rise and reached the moor. A tangle of thick gorse and purple-flowering heather grew up ahead, marking the edge of the WindClan camp.

Crouching low, Stripestar crept forward at the head of his warriors. *There's the camp . . . But where is WindClan?*

A sudden yelp to their right answered his question. Jerking his head, he spotted two cats speeding away from a clump of heather where they must have been lying in wait, watching. *A patrol!*

Stripestar tensed, his mind racing. *Do we give chase, or attack the camp?* It was tempting to press on—but if he let those cats go free, they would surely raise the alarm. "After them!" he yowled.

ThunderClan took off as one, racing across the moor in pursuit of the WindClan patrol. Stripestar's heart leaped with the joy of the chase, and for a few short breaths everything seemed simple.

The WindClan scouts rounded a heap of heather, disappearing from view. Stripestar and his warriors followed, then came skidding to a halt. The Thunderpath lay ahead, looking like a dark scar carved across the land. And from among the trees that grew beside it, a large pack of WindClan warriors approached, led by a sleek black-and-white she-cat whom Stripestar recognized at once.

Galestar!

The scouts joined their Clanmates, forming a loose line as WindClan's new leader darted forward alone. *She moves like the wind itself,* Stripestar thought. Flowing fast across the ground, those sky-blue eyes shining with purpose.

Instinctively, he looked for Galestar's deputy and mate. *Pebblenose is always at her side.* But not today—there was the fluffy gray warrior, hanging back among the mass of WindClan cats.

With a jerk of his head, Stripestar summoned Tinyclaw to his side. "Normally they're joined at the tail," he whispered, with a nod at Pebblenose. "So what do you make of this? Do you think they had an argument?"

"Oh—you haven't heard? It's only gossip, of course. But at the last Gathering, Icefoot told Tumbletail that Galestar and Pebblenose have parted ways. He remains her deputy."

But not her mate.

Stripestar's heart fluttered. He shook himself and arched

his back. This was no time to act all giddy—and for what? A distant memory of two young apprentices gazing into each other's eyes beneath a full moon. Stripestar snorted at his foolishness. He had a mate already, in his own Clan. *Besides, I'm not a kit anymore. I'm a warrior, and a leader, come face-to-face with a formidable foe.*

If anything, Galestar looked even fiercer without Pebblenose at her side. There was a gentleness about WindClan's deputy that had always seemed to soften their leader. But today Stripestar saw only defiance in the set of Galestar's features as she stopped barely a whisker short of ThunderClan.

"Turn back, Stripestar," she snarled. "So my warriors need not spill *your* warriors' blood."

I don't want to fight her.

Stripestar thrust the thought away and returned a snarl of his own. "I could say the same to you, Galestar. We wouldn't be here if we hadn't scented WindClan all over our territory. Admit it! Your warriors have been hunting on ThunderClan territory, stealing prey from the mouths of our kits. Did you think that I would simply allow this, like a frightened mouse?"

To his surprise, Galestar simply scoffed. "You lie, Stripestar. My Clanmates would never do such a thing."

A low growl sounded from close by. Turning, Stripestar saw that it was Fogdrift. She stalked forward, her pelt bristling, her claws glinting. "Call him a liar again," she hissed.

"Wait!" Stripestar cried. But it was too late—Fogdrift flew at Galestar with a yowl, claws flashing.

Battle cries rang through the air as WindClan charged in

to defend their leader, paws pounding the earth, kicking up dust into the hot greenleaf air.

No turning back now. Fogdrift's words.

"ThunderClan!" roared Stripestar. "Attack!"

The two Clans slammed into each other, cats on all sides mewling and spitting and slashing furiously. Stripestar hurled himself at a burly, gray-striped tom who was making for Tinyclaw, caught the WindClan warrior off balance, and drove him down into the dirt.

As he wrestled the cat into submission, Stripestar got a glimpse of Fogdrift out of the corner of his eye. She was still hissing at Galestar, clawing savagely at her pelt. Galestar must have been taken by surprise. But she was fighting back now, battering Fogdrift with a flurry of heavy blows.

Stripestar lurched forward, abandoning his groaning opponent. *I'm coming, Fogdrift!* But hot pain stabbed through his ankle, making him yowl and twist back. A wiry brown WindClan warrior had sunk her teeth deep into him, trying to shake him like a captured squirrel. Stripestar howled and kicked his leg, throwing off his attacker, then butted her hard with his head, sending her staggering and wailing into a prickly gorse bush.

Turning once again, Stripestar tried to spot his mate among the snarling mass of warriors tearing and ripping at each other in the heat.

There! His heart thundered as he saw the she-cats tussling. Fogdrift was driving Galestar back with the sheer fury of her attack. But Galestar was nimbler. She ducked a vicious swipe

and rammed her head into Fogdrift's flank, sending Fogdrift rolling through the grass.

Shaking out her fur, Galestar snorted and bunched her hind legs, preparing to pounce.

No! Stripestar darted forward.

But the pounce never came. Galestar froze. Stripestar stumbled to a halt.

Fogdrift lay motionless, her fur rippling in the breeze.

Something's wrong. Stripestar knew it at once, a hot flash of fear deep in his chest. *Why isn't she getting up?*

Cautiously, Galestar crept forward, belly low, whiskers twitching as though she half expected Fogdrift to come surging up at her at any moment.

Fogdrift did not.

Suddenly the WindClan leader let out a soft gasp and dashed across the grass, her paws coming down on the gray she-cat's head. In the same instant, Stripestar saw what Galestar must have seen, and a chill spread through his body from head to tail-tip.

Blood!

"Fogdrift!" This time he didn't hesitate. He charged, heart pounding wildly. What was Galestar doing? Was she trying to kill her? He bunched his hind legs, ready to pounce. But then he saw—Galestar was trying to use her paws to staunch the bleeding.

It was hopeless. Galestar's eyes met his, wide with horror. Her white paws were already stained red. "I didn't . . . ," she gabbled. "I didn't mean to—"

"What have you done?" Stripestar wailed. The blood was gushing from the back of Fogdrift's head, seeping fast into the soil. Her eyes were glassy, as lifeless as pebbles at the bottom of the river.

It's over, he realized.

He stared at his mate, blinking in disbelief.

"It was an accident." The words came to him as though through a fog. *Galestar.* She was trying to talk to him. "There—see? That rock, hidden in the grass. When I pushed her away, her head must have hit it. I had no idea . . . I would never have dreamed of . . ."

"Enough." Stripestar didn't recognize his own voice. His claws slid out, and he fixed Galestar with a furious gaze.

A gray blur shot out of nowhere, and suddenly Pebblenose was there in between them, butting Galestar away. The WindClan deputy shot Stripestar a nervous look over his shoulder, yellow eyes full of panic. "WindClan!" he meowed. "Retreat!"

Stripestar felt the anger drain from him, leaving only a dull heaviness. He turned back to Fogdrift. He watched her chest rise and fall, rise and fall, then still. He could only stare at her, stricken, as though they had both turned to stone.

Dimly he became aware of ThunderClan warriors crowding around him, nudging him with their noses, rubbing his flank with theirs.

"They're on the run, Stripestar!"

"Fogdrift? Fogdrift, what's wrong?"

"Stripestar? Stripestar!"

Stripestar's gaze focused gradually on Tinyclaw, who had

spoken. The big she-cat's eyes were shining with grief. "Should we follow them?" she asked. "We can still catch them. We can still take revenge."

What's the use? Fogdrift is already gone. He gave only a small shake of his head.

Beyond, he finally noticed the rock that Galestar had pointed out. A gray, jagged slab, half hidden by long grass and stained red with the blood of his mate.

Looking up across the moor, Stripestar saw the WindClan warriors fleeing, heading toward their camp and disappearing among the heather and the gorse, until there were only two cats left. Pebblenose was frantically tugging at Galestar's pelt, trying to haul her to safety, but WindClan's leader was oblivious, stumbling in a daze. She looked almost as horrified as Stripestar felt.

As Stripestar watched, he saw Galestar cast a glance back and freeze, ears pricked, as she met his gaze. Her eyes glittered with pain, and she lurched suddenly toward Stripestar, almost shaking Pebblenose off before he managed finally to pull her away, over a rise and out of sight.

For a heartbeat, Stripestar could have sworn she was trying to say something.

Two words, to make up for what she had done.

I'm sorry.

CHAPTER 3

The heat of the long day lingered, even in the shade beneath Galestar's gorse-bush den.

Galestar lay motionless, staring into space. At any other time she would be strolling around the camp, savoring the glorious greenleaf evening, the lengthening shadows and the golden light of sunset filtering through the heather. But tonight she felt empty and numb to all the beauty of the season she loved most.

The branches rustled as Pebblenose pushed his way through, head bowed shyly, like a nervous kit. He padded to her side and dropped a vole at her feet. It was plump and warm, and the delicious smell of it filled her nostrils and made her belly rumble.

Silently, Pebblenose settled down beside her. When she made no move to eat, he nudged her softly with his head. "Come on, eat something," he pleaded. "It's your favorite."

"I'm not hungry."

Pebblenose sighed. "You know," he purred sadly, "starving yourself won't change what happened. And it won't help your Clan, either. You are a leader, Galestar. Your Clanmates need you."

"Do they?"

"What do you mean?" He sounded puzzled.

"I mean, perhaps StarClan made a mistake." She couldn't look at him—the shame burned too deeply for that. "Perhaps they should never have made me leader. Never given me nine lives. It all happened so quickly! One moment I was an apprentice. The next I was a warrior. Then a deputy, when old Milkfur retired to the elders' den." Her voice trembled with emotion. "I'd hardly come to grips with that when Swiftstar lost his last life. Now I'm the leader of WindClan!" She gave a soft snort of disbelief. "Four moons, and I still don't know what I'm doing. Maybe I'm not ready. Maybe I'll *never* be ready."

"Galestar—" Pebblenose began.

"Admit it! A real leader would have been able to talk some sense into ThunderClan. They wouldn't have gotten into a scrape over some silly rumor of cats hunting on their territory. A real leader would never have called Stripestar a liar. And then, maybe . . . maybe his mate would still be alive. Maybe—"

"Galestar!" Pebblenose's anger took her aback, and she turned to him at last. He batted her paw and gave her a stern look. "No cat thinks that. StarClan did *not* make a mistake. And your rise to leader was no accident! Let me help you see what others see clearly. You have always been wise, and strong, and kind. You have always had the qualities of a good leader—a *great* leader—and you are only suffering now because you have a good heart. You hate to shed blood—as any wise leader should! But what happened to Fogdrift was not your

fault. Do you hear me? You were defending yourself and your Clan. And when she lay stricken, did you not try to save her?"

"I tried," whispered Galestar. "And failed."

"You *tried*. And that is enough. *You* are enough."

Galestar's heart warmed a little at Pebblenose's words. *He's always stuck up for me. Always stood by me.* She knew there was no cat in all the forest she could trust more.

It was almost enough to make her wonder why they hadn't stayed together. *Almost.* But deep down, she knew that it had never been right. She loved Pebblenose, but not like a mate should be loved. He had never made her heart soar. She only wished it hadn't taken her so long to understand that. She wished they had been spared the fruitless attempts to bear a litter. That was what it had taken, in the end, to make them both see the truth.

We're friends, and that's what we'll always be.

Pebblenose spent most of his time with Thrushcall now, and he seemed all the happier for it. It brought Galestar happiness, too, to see Pebblenose content at last.

With a heavy sigh, she pushed herself up on her forelegs. "Thank you, Pebblenose," she murmured, nuzzling her ex-mate. "I mean it. You're a true friend. But now . . . now I need to speak with Stripestar."

Pebblenose started, as though stung by a nettle. "Did I hear you right?"

"I need to apologize to him," explained Galestar. "It's the least I can do."

Pebblenose's ears twitched the way they always did when

he was anxious. "But Galestar, think of how dangerous that could be. Our Clans just fought a battle, for StarClan's sake! They accused our warriors of stealing their prey, even before Fogdrift's death. And what if he wants revenge?"

"I would not blame him if he did," muttered Galestar, glancing down at her paws in shame. "As for the battle . . . that was foolishness on both sides. WindClan has no need to go skulking in ThunderClan territory, stealing prey that does not belong to us. We are hunters—fierce and bold, with plenty of prey of our own!"

Pebblenose dipped his head, suddenly uncomfortable. "I wish it were so."

"What do you mean?" asked Galestar sharply.

"I mean . . . some of the warriors have been saying that the prey runs poorly this season." Finally Pebblenose met her gaze with a regretful expression. "I'm sorry, Galestar, but . . . the rumor is true. After the battle, some warriors confessed to crossing the border. I suppose they thought that with ThunderClan claiming all of SkyClan's territory for their own, they wouldn't complain about missing a few hares elsewhere."

Galestar felt anger boiling in her belly. *How dare my warriors break the code?* But her fury was quickly overwhelmed by guilt. Stripestar had been right after all. And she'd called him a liar for it.

"I will deal with my Clanmates when I return," she hissed. "For now, I have even more reason to apologize to Stripestar."

"He will not welcome you," Pebblenose warned her. "And

who can say what his warriors may do if they find you at their border? Let ThunderClan comfort ThunderClan's leader."

Galestar nodded. "You were always wiser than me, Pebblenose," she mewed. "One day, that wisdom will make you a great leader of WindClan."

Pebblenose sank back, the relief plain on his features. "Thank StarClan! You'll stay here, then?"

"No." Galestar shook her head. "Wise or not, I must speak with Stripestar. It's my fault his mate is dead. Watch over the Clan for me while I'm gone."

Under a deep blue twilit sky, Galestar crept through Fourtrees toward the border with ThunderClan territory. As soon as she padded beneath the branches of the beech trees, she caught a scent that made her pelt bristle. *ThunderClan warriors!*

A chill spread through her that had nothing to do with the cool of the coming night. Now that she was actually here, with the scent of hostile cats in her nostrils, she was starting to have second thoughts. What ThunderClan warrior would look kindly on the she-cat who had killed their leader's mate? *Perhaps Pebblenose was right after all.* He had told her not to do this. He had told her to stay away.

But he also told me to trust myself.

The bushes rustled up ahead, and a pair of ThunderClan warriors emerged, prowling with tails raised as they moved out to either side of her.

Galestar's muscles tensed, her claws itching to slide out. But she forced herself to relax.

The ThunderClan cats looked even more nervous than she

felt. Their fur stood on end, their tails stiffened, as they cast anxious glances into the shadowy undergrowth. She could tell at once what they were thinking. *Where are the other WindClan cats who must be lying in wait?*

"I'm alone," she promised, dipping her head to show that she didn't want a fight. "And I come in peace."

One of the warriors, a tawny she-cat who reminded Galestar of her sister Crowflight, gave a contemptuous snort. "You can't expect us to believe that!" She called out to the surrounding trees. "Come out, you weasel-hearts. Face us like warriors!"

"No cat is coming," purred Galestar calmly.

After a few moments, the ThunderClan cats seemed to accept it was the truth. But they still glared at her, making no attempt to hide their hostility.

"How dare you, of all cats, threaten to cross into our territory?" demanded the other ThunderClan warrior, a sleek black tom with green eyes.

"I wish to speak with Stripestar."

"Too bad!" snarled the tom. "Do you think he wants to have a friendly talk with the cat who slew Fogdrift?"

"Go back to WindClan," added the tawny she-cat. "Before we slash open your belly!"

Galestar sighed, feeling suddenly weary. What could she do in the face of such anger? They were grieving for Fogdrift and for Stripestar. *As they have every right to.* There was no sense in arguing, so instead she turned silently and walked away.

An owl hooted somewhere in the distance as Galestar

made her way back to the WindClan camp. Night was falling fast now, laying shadows like cobwebs across the land. Fourtrees loomed ahead, the great oaks seeming dark and lifeless tonight, with no breeze to stir their branches and no moonlight to silver their leaves.

Galestar stopped, staring at the Gathering place where she had first met Stripestar all those moons ago. How different it had seemed on that night—a place of excitement and possibility. And how different *she* had been, joking and sharing dreams with another young apprentice, so full of hope . . .

Abruptly, she turned and slipped in among the trees again, heading once more for the ThunderClan camp. *I can't leave things like this.*

A delicious scent prickled in her nostrils. *Rabbit!* Her belly rumbled. She hadn't eaten all day . . . but then she had a better idea. *A peace offering.* At least then Stripestar might understand how sorry she was.

Crouching low, Galestar followed the scent trail, her whiskers twitching.

There! She spotted the furry brown creature hopping among the gnarly roots of an ancient, twisting beech tree. No Clanmates to cut off the rabbit's escape routes. *I'll just have to do this on my own, quiet and fast.*

Despite everything, Galestar's body tingled with the thrill of the hunt. She padded closer, moving carefully so that the leaf litter would muffle each paw step.

The rabbit's ears pricked up, and she froze.

Patience. It was tempting to pounce, but she wasn't an

apprentice anymore. She was a leader, smart and experienced. *In hunting, at least.* She knew when to strike, and she knew when to wait.

A heartbeat passed, then another. Finally, the rabbit's ears drooped. It had relaxed. *Now!* Galestar darted forward, bunched her hind legs, and leaped, silent and deadly. Her jaws closed with a snap on the rabbit's neck, hot blood filling her mouth and spotting the forest floor. The prey was dead before it knew what had happened.

Pride filled Galestar's heart at a hunt well executed.

And now comes the difficult part.

Resisting the impulse to gobble the rabbit down herself, Galestar carried the fresh-kill back through the forest.

She had hoped to find the ThunderClan patrol again, but the clearing where they'd challenged her was empty. Galestar felt a twinge of disappointment. *Perhaps it's for the best,* she told herself. She dropped the rabbit on the ground. *Hopefully they'll find it. And hopefully they'll understand it is a gift—an atonement for what I've done.* It was a lot to hope for. With a heavy heart, she turned away.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Two pairs of eyes gleamed in the shadows, and the two ThunderClan warriors emerged, looking every bit as suspicious as before.

"You're coming with us," the black tom told Galestar gruffly. "Stripestar *does* want to talk with you after all. Though StarClan knows why."

Galestar's heart spiked with anxiety. *Is it only a talk that he*

wants with me? But it was too late to back out now. She drew herself up tall. "Very well. I am ready."

Carrying the rabbit in her mouth, Galestar followed the stealthy ThunderClan cats beneath the trees, scrambling over boulders and pushing through ferns until at last they reached the sandy ravine where ThunderClan made their camp. She felt a rush of relief that she had chosen to come at night, when there were only a pawful of guards awake to see her here. *The whole Clan must be furious with me.*

The ThunderClan cats stopped and sat beside a great rock at one end of the camp, nodding her in through a dark crevice. Galestar lowered her head, treading carefully into a little cave encrusted with lichen and trying to ignore the racing of her heart.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness of the den, but she recognized the pine scent of Stripestar at once. A nest of moss was piled up to one side, and lying there on his side, motionless, was the leader of ThunderClan.

A great wave of sorrow overcame her at the sight. Stripestar's ears drooped. His eyes stared blankly into nothingness. If he had noticed her entering, he gave no sign of it. *He's deep in grief.* It was plain to see.

Galestar dropped the fresh-kill at Stripestar's muzzle. "I brought you something."

The tom stirred at last. He lifted his head to sniff at the rabbit, then dropped it again. "Thanks. But I can't eat."

"Because of me. Because of what I did." Galestar hung her head. "Stripestar, I . . . I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry

for your loss. I want you to know, I never meant for it to happen. I wouldn't even have fought you, if I'd known the truth. Pebblenose told me that WindClan warriors really were hunting on ThunderClan territory. I had no idea. But I promise you, it will never happen again."

"It doesn't matter now," replied Stripestar in a dull voice.

"And that rock! If only I had seen it . . . but it was hidden by the grass. I swear to you, I did all I could to save Fogdrift. Knowing that I couldn't save her is a pain I will bear forever, even in the hunting grounds of StarClan, and . . ." She paused for breath. *I'm babbling. I sound like a fool.* She didn't know how to explain—how to make him understand. And from the anguish in his eyes, she was starting to worry that she was doing more harm than good. "You have to believe me, Stripestar," she finished at last.

A long silence stretched out between them, before Stripestar replied.

"I do. I believe you, Galestar."

I ought to feel relieved, Galestar thought. But her own heart was heavy with grief now, just as Stripestar's was. She hesitated, wanting desperately to offer him some comfort. But no words she could think of seemed right.

"May I . . . ?" she muttered, lowering herself down next to him. And when he gave no reply, she lay there, feeling awkward and somehow sure that she had done the wrong thing.

"You didn't need to bring a gift," Stripestar murmured at last. "I asked my warriors to bring you here because . . . well, I

want you to know that I don't blame you for what happened. I only blame myself."

"No!" spluttered Galestar. "I was the one who—"

"Please . . ." Stripestar silenced her with a wave of his paw. "Let me explain. It was my decision to attack WindClan. Tinyclaw warned me not to. Fogdrift too. She told me that if I went too far, there would be no turning back. I . . . didn't know how right she was."

Galestar hesitated, summoning the courage to ask a question she had been turning over in her own mind. "Why *didn't* you turn back? Why force a battle with WindClan?"

Stripestar heaved a sigh as he pushed himself upright. "The truth is, ThunderClan is starving. The prey has not been running well. Not since the Twolegs came. On top of that, the nursery is overflowing with kits from several litters, all born at once." He let out a groan of frustration. "We have so many mouths to feed! Even the paltry prey your warriors have been taking could make the difference between life and death and see us through these lean times. At least until the kits are old enough to help with the hunting."

Galestar shook her head sadly. She wanted to offer Stripestar more fresh-kill for his Clan—more than the single rabbit she had brought him. *But how can I? ThunderClan's troubles are the same as WindClan's.* Why else would her warriors resort to stealing prey?

"I don't know the solution to your problem," she began, haltingly. "I wish I could help, though. WindClan has precious little prey as it is, but we could share it with you."

"No." Stripestar frowned. In the darkness, his amber eyes were suddenly gleaming with a hint of their usual fire. "What we need is more territory," he mused. "More prey. For *both* Clans."

Galestar frowned. "Are you saying we could work together? But where? What territory?"

"Sunningrocks," Stripestar replied at once. "RiverClan has held it for too long, and the prey has always run well there. What do you think? Could we take it?"

Galestar considered. Stripestar was staring eagerly at her now, and it fired her heart to see him so hopeful again, even if it was just a brief distraction from his grief.

Still, she had to do what was best for her Clan.

"I see what's in it for ThunderClan," she replied carefully. "The prey there could feed your kits. But Sunningrocks is a long way from the moor. Besides, ThunderClan and RiverClan have been squabbling over that territory for generations. If WindClan gets involved, ShadowClan won't like it, and RiverClan will be *furious*. So what do we get, in return for our help?"

"Hunting rights." Stripestar shrugged. "Your warriors have already been hunting on our territory. If ThunderClan had Sunningrocks, we could allow that to continue."

Galestar fell silent, thinking it over. Slowly, she began to feel her pelt prickling with excitement. *ThunderClan would survive. . . . WindClan would have no need to share prey, just to assuage their leader's guilt. . . . It could really work.*

"Sunningrocks . . . ," she murmured. "I like it. But RiverClan

won't give it up without a fight. And I can't drag WindClan into a battle that will never end."

"That won't happen," Stripestar promised. "Not if we work together. Think of it—RiverClan won't stand a chance! They'll have to give up Sunningrocks, which they don't need anyway. ThunderClan and WindClan will have enough prey at last. And best of all, we'll win such a great victory that RiverClan will never dare challenge us for the territory again. The squabbles over Sunningrocks will be done. *Forever!*"

Galestar could feel her own excitement mounting along with Stripestar's. It reminded her of the night they had first met—how she had admired that strong young tabby, with his sparkling eyes and his big dreams of a world beyond the forest.

"We'll wait until you're ready," she suggested, thinking of Fogdrift. "A half-moon, or as long as you need to—"

"No," Stripestar interrupted, to her surprise. "No waiting. ThunderClan can't afford that luxury."

"But . . . you're still grieving."

Stripestar shrugged as though it hardly mattered what he felt. "My Clan needs to eat now. Not in a half-moon. We must attack tomorrow, or the day after that. Any longer and my warriors will be too weak to fight."

Galestar looked at him, amazed. He was older now than when they'd met, and wiser, no doubt. But he still had the same sparkle in his eyes, even through all the pain he must be feeling. *He's still thinking of his Clan, still planning a future, even after one of the worst losses imaginable.* Stripestar wasn't beaten. Galestar had the feeling he never would be.

Perhaps that was what made him such a strong leader.

"ThunderClan is lucky to have you," she purred, drawing herself up and meeting his amber gaze with a determined nod. "Very well, then. The day after tomorrow. WindClan will be ready . . . and we will fight by ThunderClan's side."

When Galestar ducked her head out of the den, she found the two ThunderClan warriors still waiting for her. The mistrust in their eyes quickly turned to bafflement as they saw Stripestar following.

"Escort Galestar back to WindClan," he ordered, briskly. "See that she returns safely. Frecklepelt!" One of the guards, a dappled white she-cat, came scampering over. "There's a rabbit in my den. Take it to the fresh-kill pile and make sure the elders and queens get their share. And fetch Tinyclaw! I need to speak with her."

"What in StarClan's name did you say to him?" muttered the black tom, leading Galestar out of the camp.

"It's not me," Galestar replied in wonder. "It's *him*."

Galestar cast one last glance over her shoulder, but she could no longer see Stripestar among the pelts of the ThunderClan cats he had roused into action.

She felt an oddly familiar twinge of disappointment. She had lost him, just as she had on that first night many moons ago when they were swept away from each other, when neither of them had even imagined being the leader of a Clan and they were nothing but starry-eyed apprentices trying to find their way.

Chapter 4

Stripestar panted hard, his chest heaving with every breath. His flank was sticky and clotted with blood, his right ear torn, the claws loose in his left hind foot. But none of it could dampen the fierce joy that surged through him in a torrent.

Victory! StarClan, did anything taste so sweet?

He stood, all four paws set square, astride the huge, foam-flecked slabs of rock that they had won—ThunderClan and WindClan *together*. At his side, Galestar dipped her head, as though stunned by the magnitude of what they had accomplished.

"We did it," Stripestar breathed. He could hardly believe it himself. "Sunningrocks is ours!"

Galestar only nodded, dazed.

The sun beat down on the riverbank where the battle had been fought. The grass was flattened and smeared into mud, churned up by scrabbling paws. Stripestar's heart swelled to see the best warriors of ThunderClan—*and WindClan*—licking their wounds and prowling around the edges of the clearing, making sure no RiverClan cats dared show their hides.

"RiverClan never knew what hit them," Galestar murmured. She was panting every bit as hard as Stripestar, but

had suffered only a light scratch across the side of her face. Not for the first time, Stripestar marveled at the ferocity the WindClan leader had shown in battle. At one point he'd spotted her taking on two big toms at once and sending them both mewling and yowling for the bushes. *She's a great warrior . . . though it's hardly a surprise.*

"Thanks to WindClan," Stripestar meowed. "Two Clans attacking at once . . . They didn't stand a chance!"

Galestar nodded. "I have only one regret," she muttered.

Stripestar knew at once what she meant. Casting his eyes over the riverbank, he spotted Pebblenose curled up alone by the river, his head buried in his forepaws, and his heart went out to the WindClan deputy.

"It was an accident," he reminded Galestar. "He didn't mean to kill Turtlesnap."

The dead RiverClan she-cat lay a short distance away from Pebblenose, sprawled in mud that was turning dark with her blood. One of ThunderClan's medicine cats, Stoneflower, had examined Turtlesnap and found that a stray blow from Pebblenose had opened up an old wound.

Stripestar hesitated, trying to find the right words. "Look at it this way. If it hadn't happened, RiverClan might not have turned tail and fled. More warriors might have died."

"Perhaps." Galestar didn't sound convinced, but she shook herself and looked up. "What's done is done. Turtlesnap hunts with StarClan now."

"And the battle is over."

Pride swelled in Stripestar's heart once again as he stood beside Galestar, watching the medicine cats move among

the injured warriors below, passing out herbs and smoothing ointments onto wounds. "Look at what we've done," he murmured in awe.

The cats of both Clans mingled together. *Almost like one single Clan . . .*, thought Stripestar. *And what a Clan that would be!*

"I have some alarming news to share," growled Birchstar. She sat up tall, commanding silence from the Great Rock.

Sitting beside the old RiverClan leader, Stripestar shared a quick glance with Galestar. *We both know what she's about to say.* Galestar looked calm, but Stripestar could feel his heart beating fast.

A full moon shone down on the first Gathering since the battle for Sunningrocks. Beneath the boughs of the four great oaks, Stripestar could see cats shuffling uneasily in the darkened clearing below. *Only ShadowClan doesn't know what happened yet . . . but they soon will.* Stripestar had already had to break up a scuffle between Hazelfrond and a RiverClan warrior as they were waiting for ShadowClan to arrive.

Now the real quarrel will begin.

"Three days ago, Sunningrocks was seized from RiverClan," Birchstar announced. "You all know that ThunderClan has long laid claim to this territory, which is rightfully ours."

A few mutters rose from the clearing at that, until Birchstar raised a paw for silence. The tabby she-cat was graying around the muzzle and slighter than she'd been in her youth. But her eyes still blazed with passion as she fixed her gaze on Stripestar and Galestar, each in turn.

"We might have expected such treachery from your

warriors, Stripestar. But the attack came not only from ThunderClan. Galestar! Will you explain to the Gathering why WindClan joined forces with ThunderClan to steal our territory?"

Anxious murmurs swelled quickly into gasps and yowls of disbelief from the cats of ShadowClan.

"Since when do WindClan and ThunderClan fight side by side?" cried a RiverClan cat from below.

"Whose idea was this?"

"Sunningrocks is ours! What business is it of WindClan's?"

Dozens of suspicious eyes fixed on Galestar and on Stripestar. He shot a glance at the ShadowClan leader. Snakestar's fur was bristling, his yellow eyes narrowed as he considered Birchstar's words.

Stripestar's heart jumped as he felt a soft touch against his tail. Galestar stood at his side, not looking at him. But her tail had curled to brush against his. *Don't be afraid,* she seemed to be saying. He sat up straighter in response.

The Gathering quieted down as Snakestar cleared his throat to address them. "This is strange indeed," he purred, his voice dangerously soft. "The conflict over Sunningrocks is almost as old as the Clans themselves. All this time, WindClan has stayed out of it. Why pick a side now? Surely you don't claim to have helped ThunderClan out of the goodness of your heart, Galestar?" Some cats snorted at that, but Snakestar wasn't finished. "I fear there may be some darker purpose behind your actions. Where does this end? Do you seek more territory for yourselves?"

"Of course not!" Stripestar exploded before Galestar had a chance to reply. She gave him a warning look, but his blood was running hot. He couldn't help himself. "Galestar and I have only the best intentions. RiverClan had no need of Sunningrocks! They are plump and well-fed, even without it. Meanwhile, WindClan and ThunderClan have gone hungry. Don't you see? This makes sense for every cat! That's why we chose to fight together. Now ThunderClan has enough fresh-kill to feed our kits, who grow stronger every day, and WindClan . . . WindClan has . . ." He faltered, feeling suddenly uneasy. It was unheard of for a Clan to share hunting territory with its neighbor. He wasn't sure why, but he suddenly felt embarrassed by the deal he had proposed so soon after Fogdrift's death. It had made sense when he was alone with Galestar. But now he worried about looking weak to the other leaders.

"Yes, go on," called Ravencry, the deputy of ShadowClan. "What's in it for WindClan? How was this alliance forged in the first place?"

Stripestar's stomach roiled as he turned to Galestar. *She was wise to stay silent,* he realized too late. He looked into her deep blue eyes and saw only sorrow there. She gave a small nod, which told him all he needed to know. *Tell them. You have no choice.*

His wound had hardly begun to heal. Now he would have to reopen it.

Heaving a sigh, Stripestar hung his head. "The truth is . . . there was a fight. Between ThunderClan and WindClan. And my mate, my Fogdrift, she . . . she was killed."

A stunned silence followed his words. But a moment later, the clearing erupted with yelps and cries of outrage.

"Help me understand," meowed Birchstar when the uproar had died down at last. "You have chosen to join forces with the very Clan that *killed your mate?*"

"They didn't," Stripestar protested. "No cat did. It was only an accident—a terrible one. I saw it happen with my own eyes. Fogdrift fell. There was a rock hidden in the grass, and she . . . she hit her head." His chest throbbed with pain, but he forced himself to keep going, to recount it all for the Gathering. *I have to make them understand.* "Galestar tried to *help* Fogdrift. To save her life. She did her best, but it was hopeless. Not even a medicine cat could have done anything for her."

As he finished, his throat was tight, his grief swirling up inside him. But he fought it down, glaring around with defiance and daring any cat to meet his gaze.

None did.

It was Floatweed who finally broke the silence. "I am sorry for your loss," meowed the RiverClan deputy carefully. "But it doesn't justify what you did—what you *both* did—at Sunningrocks. We lost a cat too. Turtlesnap was—"

"And we are sorry for it," Galestar interrupted. Stripestar was startled to see her sit up straight at last, eyes shining in the moonlight. "But we did not take this decision lightly. You say that Sunningrocks belongs to you. ThunderClan says the same! What does it matter, when kits and elders have been starving? We had to act. If RiverClan went hungry, or any other Clan, their leader would have made the same choice we did."

"So what now?" Snakestar demanded before Floatweed could argue back. "Does the alliance still hold?"

A curious sadness tugged at Stripestar's heart. He had been wondering the same thing. *I don't want it to be over.* And as his eyes met Galestar's, he saw with a rush of excitement that she felt the same way.

"Yes," they replied as one.

"We work well together," Galestar added. "And why not, if it is for the good of our Clanmates?"

Stripestar couldn't help but notice the muttering and the dirty looks that were shot at his Clanmates in the clearing from other cats—not just RiverClan, but ShadowClan too. The air felt tight with suspicion and anger. *They don't trust us.*

For the first time, Stripestar felt a shiver of doubt. *Perhaps we should have spoken to Birchstar and Snakestar first . . . ?* But no. There hadn't been any time. He'd had to do what was needed to save his Clan. Just as Galestar had.

"Stripestar and Galestar, you have made your position clear," declared Snakestar with deadly calm. "Now let me tell you what I think. You speak of Clans going hungry. Every day now, the Twolegs bring their strange contraptions into ShadowClan's territory. We have seen this before, in the territory of SkyClan, and we know what happens next. They destroy our hunting grounds and drive us from the forest! No doubt ShadowClan is next. It will be *our* kits going hungry. *Our* elders starving. So if any Clan needs more territory, it is ShadowClan. Before the monsters come, before the Twolegs take our land, we must redraw the borders. We must share out the forest between us, so that every Clan has enough prey to hunt."

Stripestar squirmed at Snakestar's speech. ThunderClan had only just won enough territory to feed themselves, and now they were being asked to give some of it away? Birchstar looked uncomfortable too. No doubt she didn't like the prospect of losing more territory any more than Stripestar did.

In the end it was Galestar who spoke up. "Only StarClan can glimpse the future," she told Snakestar. "We must concern ourselves with the present. The borders of our territories are well established. They have served well for generations. Why redraw them now, for fear of what *might* happen?"

Snakestar's gaze turned cold, his pelt prickling as he turned on Galestar. "Do you think yourself the leader of all Clans now, Galestar? If you say no, we must all obey?"

"It's not just her," growled Stripestar. He knew at once it was unwise, but he couldn't let Galestar go undefended. "Galestar is right. No cat knows what the Twolegs may do or not do. We won't give up our territory just because you are afraid. It's not right."

Birchstar gave a snort of disbelief. "Now he talks of what's right!" she hooted. "The leader of ThunderClan, who joined with another Clan to bully us out of Sunningrocks! Who killed Turtlesnap!"

"That was an accident," Galestar shot back.

"Pebblenose would never kill another cat deliberately," added Stripestar. "And ThunderClan cats are not bullies!"

"It was RiverClan who kept Sunningrocks for themselves," agreed Galestar. "Growing fat on fresh fish when they knew that other cats so desperately needed prey."

"And besides—"

"What *is* this?" howled Ravencry, silencing the pair of them. "What is going on?"

Stripestar and Galestar stared at him. "What do you mean?"

The ShadowClan deputy let out a harsh laugh. "I mean, the two of you! Agreeing on everything . . . finishing each other's sentences, as though you share one mind! The rest of us didn't know until tonight that Fogdrift had died. Yet here you are, already rubbing flanks and huddling close to each other like moonstruck kits! Speak the truth, Stripestar. Your mate is dead. Have you moved on so soon?"

Stripestar's mouth went dry. He felt suddenly hot all over, and he could hear his heart pounding in his ears. "Of course not," he managed to croak. "We're only doing what's best for our Clans."

"That's right," added Galestar. "We're allies, and that's all."

"That's all," Stripestar agreed.

Looking around at the gathered cats, Stripestar could see at once that they didn't believe him. *But I love Fogdrift!* he wanted to cry out. *Of course I do!*

Didn't he?

Somehow, Ravencry's words had cut deeply. And as he snuck a glance at the proud, sleek black-and-white she-cat who sat beside him—the most brave and noble leader he had ever known—Stripestar found himself wondering . . .

Do I even believe myself?

Chapter 5

The long, warm greenleaf had finally given way to early leaf-fall, and the nights were turning chilly. A few curling leaves skittered through WindClan's camp, carried by a brisk breeze that cut through Galestar's pelt and made her shiver. Under a dark and clouded sky, she crept among the dens, treading carefully so as not to wake the kits. *Or any other cat, for that matter.*

Her limbs were heavy with exhaustion. It had been a long night, and the nest in her gorse-bush den had never looked so inviting. With a weary sigh, she ducked inside and curled up, letting her body sink into the soft moss, her muscles relaxing, her eyelids drooping.

She was half asleep when she heard some cat clearing their throat.

"Who is it?" she demanded, instantly jerking out of her slumber.

A pair of yellow eyes glinted from the shadows outside. Then Pebblenose pushed his head into the den. "Forgive me, Galestar. May I speak with you?"

Galestar frowned. *What's he doing up so late?* But she nodded all the same. "Come in."

Her faithful deputy slipped in beneath the gorse and settled down next to her. For a little while he remained silent, gaze fixed on his paws, as though wrestling with something.

Galestar let him take his time. Her heart was aching for him. The poor tom hadn't been the same since the battle at Sunningrocks and the death of Turtlesnap. For moons he had seemed lost in his own thoughts, speaking little and spending much of the day wandering alone. Even Thrushcall couldn't persuade him to talk.

But when Pebblenose looked up at last, Galestar could see in his eyes that she was wrong. *This isn't about Turtlesnap at all.*

"Galestar," Pebblenose murmured. "I have always been honest with you, when we were mates, and since then too. I believe you have always been so with me."

"Of course. You're the best deputy a leader could ask for, Pebblenose."

Pebblenose nodded thoughtfully. "Then tell me. Why have you been meeting Stripestar in secret?"

A gasp caught in Galestar's throat. *He knows.* She'd been so careful these past few moons. . . . How could he possibly have found out?

Pebblenose was waiting patiently for her answer. Galestar's heart was thumping. But as much as she might want to, she found that she couldn't lie to her dearest friend. "How did you know?" she asked quietly.

"I've been watching you," replied Pebblenose, fixing her with a stern gaze. "One night I couldn't sleep, so I left the den for some fresh air. That was the first time I spotted you

sneaking out. Since then, I've seen you leave many times, always in the dead of night." He frowned. "I thought it was odd. I told myself that as Clan leader, you bear a great weight on your shoulders—perhaps you needed time to yourself, to think and to plan. But you never mentioned it to any cat. I started to worry—was there something more going on? So I followed you, always at a distance."

Galestar's heart sank. "All the way to Fourtrees?" she asked.

His grave expression told her it was true. "I saw you meeting Stripestar there. Night after night. So now I must ask you—was Ravencry right? At the Gathering when we talked about the alliance between ThunderClan and WindClan, when he suggested that you and Stripestar were . . . together. You know that a relationship with a cat from another Clan is forbidden for any warrior—not to mention *leader*. So tell me, Galestar. Do you have feelings for him?"

"No!" Galestar cried before she could stop to consider the question. "We're allies. And friends, I suppose. We've been meeting since the battle at Sunningrocks to discuss what our Clans might achieve together. And what we would do if the other Clans tried to break up our alliance. You saw how angry they were after the battle."

"With good reason!"

"But even so—"

"Galestar." Pebblenose silenced her with the single quiet word. "What you say makes perfect sense. But you're forgetting something."

"What's that?"

"I know you." Pebblenose's eyes shone in the gloom. "I've been listening to you talk about Stripestar for moons now. *Stripestar did this . . . Stripestar did that . . .* And always with that light in your eyes! In all the seasons you and I were mates, I never saw you look at me that way."

"I . . . that's not . . . ," stammered Galestar.

"I don't blame you for it!" Pebblenose added quickly. "You and I were never meant to be. We both know that. But . . ."

He hesitated, ears flattening, and Galestar froze as she guessed what he was going to say next.

"But . . . you and Stripestar cannot be together. The warrior code forbids it. Two leaders, from different Clans! It can never be. And if you think Birchstar and Snakestar mistrust you now, imagine what they might do if you and Stripestar chose to become mates!"

Mates. A strange thrill ran through Galestar at the thought. But she shrugged it off at once. "It's not what you think," she replied, more gruffly than she had intended. "I already told you, Pebblenose. We are allies, nothing more. Once ThunderClan has recovered and no longer needs our help to defend Sunningrocks, it will be over. I will end the alliance."

"Will you?"

Pebblenose sounded doubtful, but Galestar was too weary to argue. She let out a soft grunt of dismissal. Her deputy didn't need telling twice. Without another word, he padded silently out of the den.

Galestar was alone. *At last.* But as tired as she was, she knew

that she would get no sleep tonight. There were too many thoughts buzzing around her head, like a swarm of angry bees.

All through the next day, Galestar felt as if she were sleepwalking. It was a relief when the camp finally fell quiet and she could slink off once again toward Fourtrees.

Is Pebblenose following me tonight? she wondered as she prowled across the moor. She batted the thought away as though it were a troublesome bramble in her path. She didn't really believe he was. But still she felt like her deputy was watching her, judging her every move.

Pushing through the bushes at the edges of the hollow, Galestar saw Stripestar waiting for her in the clearing beneath the four great oaks. The big brown tabby's amber eyes shone as Galestar descended the slope to meet him. Overhead, the branches swayed, shedding leaves that drifted slowly to the ground like snowflakes. But inside the hollow it was warm and sheltered from the wind. *Our place,* thought Galestar. *Like a den, for just the two of us.*

"What do you think?" asked Stripestar eagerly.

He dipped his head, and Galestar noticed the fresh-kill that lay on the ground before him—a squirrel and a plump wood pigeon.

"Not bad . . ." She grinned. "Which is mine?"

"They're *both* yours." Stripestar nudged them toward her with his snout.

Galestar snorted with amusement. "I take it ThunderClan has no shortage of prey, then?"

"Not anymore." Stripestar's expression turned serious. "And it's all thanks to you, Galestar. I mean, you and WindClan, of course."

Galestar's throat closed up as she realized what he was saying.

"I'm glad of it," she croaked.

But she wasn't. It made her heart sink for some reason she couldn't quite put her paw on. *Perhaps because I don't want to.*

It was only last night that she had promised Pebblenose she would end the alliance the moment ThunderClan was back on its paws. Now here it was—the moment they had spoken of. She'd never dreamed it would come so soon.

Galestar felt suddenly awkward, swishing her tail and scuffing at the ground with her forepaw. "I suppose this is the end, then," she muttered. "Our alliance has served its purpose."

Stripestar nodded stiffly, not quite meeting her eyes. "Those kits I was worried about—they're all apprentices now, hunting for themselves. They'll be warriors before we know it. The prey's been running well. Thank StarClan, ThunderClan is . . . *thriving.*"

He didn't sound happy about it.

They fell silent, the air heavy between them.

"I'll miss . . . this," muttered Stripestar at last. "Our meetings. That is, if you think the alliance really should end?"

"Pebblenose thinks so."

He looked up sharply at that. "You mean . . . you don't?"

Galestar considered. "Perhaps," she murmured, "even if the

alliance is over, we could still meet and talk as friends? It's lonely being the leader of a Clan. Especially without a mate."

Stripestar winced.

An icy prickle spread down Galestar's spine as she realized what a fool she had been. *Mouse-brain! I was thinking of myself and not of Stripestar.* "I'm so sorry," she gasped. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's all right." Stripestar heaved a sigh. "It's been many moons. Tinyclaw tells me I should find a new mate one day."

Galestar could hardly breathe. "Is that . . . something you want?"

"One day. Perhaps." Stripestar swallowed and shot her a look. "And you?"

"Perhaps. One day." She considered. "Pebblenose has always been a good friend to me. But if I were to take a new mate, it would have to be a cat who felt like . . . something *more* than a friend."

"Agreed."

Another, deeper silence lingered between them. *But not a bad one.*

Galestar felt dizzy at how close he was—how close she *felt* to him—as she drank in his familiar scent, his fierce amber eyes, and his rich brown pelt, glimmering with red and gold like embers in a fire.

Stripestar seemed to hesitate, about to say something, before he changed his mind. "I should get back to ThunderClan," he mumbled at last. "Tinyclaw has begun waiting up for me."

Galestar snorted softly. "I'm sure Pebblenose is too. That

is, if he's not hiding in the bushes watching us now." She licked her lips, all too aware of the pounding of her heart. "Thank you, Stripestar, for all that you've done. And . . . for your forgiveness."

Stripestar hung his head. "You saved my Clan. I will always be grateful for that. So . . . farewell." He turned and padded across the clearing, his tail drooping behind him.

Let him go. That's what Pebblenose would have told her. But as she watched Stripestar walk away, her gut lurched with disappointment. She couldn't bear the idea of losing . . . whatever this was. Losing *him.*

"Wait!"

Stripestar stopped and turned back at her cry, his ears pricking up.

Is that hope in his eyes? She wanted to believe it. "When will I see you again?"

"You mean—"

"I mean . . . friends. If you'd like?"

Stripestar nodded eagerly. "I'd like that very much. We can talk. I mean, about being leaders," he added hastily.

"We can."

Galestar looked away, trusting the shadows to hide her relief—and her delight.

Her heart sang as she left Fourtrees, slipping through the darkness and back toward the WindClan camp. The stars seemed brighter than ever, glittering in the sky to light her path. The grass felt so soft and springy beneath her paws, as

though she were walking on air. Even the wind had dropped to a soothing breath, cool as a clear stream on a hot day in greenleaf.

It was only when Galestar reached the moor and caught the scent of her camp that a shadow clouded her soul.

What will Pebblenose think of this?

She would have to tell him of their decision—that she and Stripestar were going to keep meeting in secret, alliance or not. And whatever she didn't tell him, he would soon guess for himself.

He's not going to like it.

But tonight, Galestar didn't care.

Chapter 6

On the Great Rock at Fourtrees, two cats sat still and silver in the streaming light of the moon, their tails entwined as they gazed up in wonder at a sky full of stars.

Stripestar's chest swelled, so full of love he thought he might burst. With Galestar at his side, he felt as calm as a deep lake of crystal water and as unstoppable as a raging torrent. Together, they could do anything.

Could it really have been two whole seasons since the night the alliance ended, and since they had decided to keep on meeting anyway? They had been so . . . *awkward* with each other, each hiding their true feelings. What a difference these six moons had made! It felt so good not to hide anymore.

At least, not from each other.

Stripestar hung his head. He never wanted this moment to end. But he knew—*we both know*—that they couldn't go on like this.

"It's time, isn't it?" he purred softly.

He felt Galestar stiffen. "You mean . . ."

"We have to tell them. ThunderClan and WindClan. We can't conceal our love any longer."

Galestar nodded. The silence stretched out between them, heavy with uncertainty.

At length, she sighed. "I know you're right. I'm just . . . afraid. Pebblenose barely accepted it when I told him. He's kept our secret, but I can see it weighs on him. He's not been the same cat since. And he's my closest companion in the whole Clan! What did Tinyclaw say when you told her?"

Stripestar shuffled his paws, his cheeks warming with shame. "I, er . . . haven't. She thinks I like to hunt in the night, like an owl."

Galestar snorted, but she sounded sad. "You're afraid too, then."

"They won't understand." Stripestar dipped his head. "Two leaders of different Clans in love! It's against the warrior code. It makes no sense. Unless . . . well . . ." He faltered.

"Unless what?" purred Galestar.

She was watching him with those beautiful, clear blue eyes. Waiting.

Stripestar breathed deep and slow. He had imagined this moment many times over the last half-moon or so as his feelings had grown—telling Galestar of the dream he had been turning over each night, alone in his den. A dream he had shared with no cat. Now that the moment had come, he was afraid that it might turn to dust the instant he spoke it.

But what good are dreams, if we don't fight for them?

"What if . . ." he began. "What if we weren't the leaders of two Clans, but of one?"

Galestar frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean . . . what if we joined our Clans together?"

His fur tingled from head to tail-tip as he watched her consider it. She looked confused. Doubtful. *But she's not laughing at me. She's not calling me a fool.*

"Do you really think we could?"

"It wouldn't be easy," Stripestar admitted. His heart was in his mouth. *I have to make her see.* "But if we can only convince our Clanmates . . . imagine it! Think of what we could achieve!"

"Convince them *how*?" wondered Galestar.

Stripestar frowned. "I've given it some thought. They'll resist it, of course. Change is hard. But if we remind them of how much better things have been since the battle for Sunningrocks . . . perhaps we can persuade them that way. And once it's done, and they all see how much stronger we are together, and how much better it is for every cat . . . What do you think, Galestar?"

She was looking uncomfortable, and Stripestar felt his heart pounding faster and faster in his chest. *It's not working . . . I'm losing her!* She pawed at the rock, tail flicking, deep in thought. "Perhaps . . . ," she mewed at last. "Perhaps it's something we *need* to do."

Stripestar's whole body flooded with relief.

"After all," Galestar added, "Birchstar has been muttering about an alliance with ShadowClan ever since the battle at Sunningrocks. And Snakestar keeps grumbling about needing more territory for his Clan, too. Of course, they haven't actually *made* an alliance."

"But they *might*," meowed Stripestar.

"Of *course* they might. And we need to be ready for that. If it happens."

Her eyes were shining now, just like his.

In the midst of Stripestar's rising excitement, a dark thought stirred like an adder slithering in the grass. *We're lying. To ourselves. To each other.* There was no real danger of ShadowClan and RiverClan forming an alliance . . . which meant there was no need to join their Clans together at all. But what was one small lie if it lit the path to such a beautiful future?

Galestar sighed. "I wish we had more time. It won't be easy, getting our Clanmates to agree to this. If there were only some other way of making them see . . ."

"But there isn't," replied Stripestar. "And we don't have time."

His eyes were drawn down, as they had been so often these past few moons, to Galestar's belly. He was almost sure he could see a swelling there now. Soon no cat would be able to miss it. Every cat in WindClan would see the truth for themselves.

Their leader was expecting kits.

Stripestar thrummed with pride. *My kits. Our kits.*

But that was the problem. Galestar had no mate in WindClan. Every cat would be asking questions—and questions with no easy answers. *Who is the father? Has Galestar broken the warrior code? How can she lead us now?*

They both fell silent again, thinking hard. But they had been over it so many times, without finding a better solution. There was no way for them to be together. No way but this.

Stripestar's stomach turned somersaults with nerves, just thinking about telling ThunderClan. *But at least I won't be alone. We'll be doing it together.*

"We'll make it work," Stripestar promised his mate. "One Clan. For our Clanmates. For us. And for our kits."

He stepped closer, bending his head to nuzzle Galestar's belly. He could hear her heartbeat fluttering like a butterfly in her chest, and he felt the gentle touch of her tail curling around him, the warmth of the love they shared spreading through them and chasing off every last doubt.

It felt so good—and so right. *Surely nothing can stand in our way.*

The morning dawned cold and gray, and a thin drizzle dampened the pelts of ThunderClan as Stripestar led them through the long, wet grass toward Fourtrees.

As he pushed through the bushes that skirted the hollow, shaking rain from his whiskers, his stomach began to churn with anxiety. *It's time.*

Sure enough, WindClan had already arrived. Galestar sat high on the Great Rock, where they had spent the night together, and her warriors were spread out in the clearing below, all as wet and confused as ThunderClan.

When they saw Stripestar, some of the WindClan cats sprang to their feet, arching their backs and hissing. Others simply swung their heads to Galestar and back again, as though waiting for some explanation. *What's ThunderClan doing here? What are* we *doing here?*

The two leaders locked eyes, and Galestar gave him a

small, determined nod. Stripestar felt his heart lift a little to see his mate once again.

Padding across the leaf mulch, Stripestar heard whispers and muttering break out among his own warriors.

"WindClan!"

"What's happening? Are we going to war?"

No cat has any idea what we're about to tell them. His heart thundering, Stripestar hopped up onto the Great Rock, to Galestar's side, leaving his warriors puzzled and milling in the clearing below.

"What is this?" called Tinyclaw, speaking for every cat present. She prowled out in front of ThunderClan, eyeing WindClan with suspicion. "I thought our alliance was over. Or have you brought us here for a battle?"

Some of the WindClan warriors spat and unleashed their claws. But Galestar held up a paw.

"There will be no battle," Stripestar announced. "But we do have something to tell you—something wonderful."

Huddled in the thin rain, the cats below looked doubtful, even suspicious. But Stripestar didn't allow it to discourage him.

"These past twelve moons, ThunderClan has owed WindClan a great debt. Without your help at Sunningrocks, our Clan might not even have survived."

"We won a great victory that day," Galestar added. "Great for WindClan, too. And thanks to the fight at Sunningrocks, ThunderClan's kits have grown strong and well. Now ThunderClan is the biggest and strongest Clan in the forest! Which is why . . ."

She shot a look at Stripestar. He nodded, hoping it would fill her with courage. *Go on. Say it.*

"Which is why we should consider joining them."

No cat spoke. They all stared blankly at their leaders, utterly baffled.

It was a dark brown tabby warrior from WindClan who finally broke the silence. "What?" he muttered. *Thrushcall,* Stripestar guessed. He was standing shoulder to shoulder with Pebblenose, whose expression was every bit as grim as his mate's. "What do you mean, *join* them?"

"I mean just that," replied Galestar calmly. "Merge our Clans together. Become *one* Clan. A new, bigger, and better Clan."

"But . . . surely you're not serious!" Thrushcall didn't even sound angry—just astonished. Stripestar shifted uneasily from paw to paw.

"I'm *quite* serious," Galestar told him. "And why not? It would mean never going to war with ThunderClan again. Surely you would want that."

"Of course!" spluttered Thrushcall. "But that doesn't mean we should destroy WindClan!"

Suddenly it seemed as if every cat in WindClan was talking at once, calling out objections.

"I'm a WindClan cat, and I always will be!"

"I'll never join ThunderClan!"

Only Pebblenose remained silent. But the fierce set of his brow told Stripestar that he agreed with Thrushcall.

Stripestar's heart sank. He'd known this wouldn't be easy. *But it's already going so much worse than we feared.*

"Thrushcall is right." Now it was Grassfoot's turn to speak. *My own littermate,* thought Stripestar with a shiver of discomfort.

"I'm proud of being a ThunderClan cat," Grassfoot declared. "I want to stay that way. Besides . . . how would this work? Our camp is full already, without a whole other Clan moving in. And surely you are not asking us to go and live on the moor with WindClan, out in the open?"

"WindClan and ThunderClan are *both* important," added Roughpelt. "You cannot decide to simply end them!"

More shouts of agreement. More angry yowling. Stripestar and Galestar shared a panicked look. *They don't understand!*

"Listen!" cried Galestar, holding her paw up again, until the cats settled into an uneasy quiet. "We have no intention for one Clan to swallow the other. What we want to do is form a *new* Clan."

"A Clan that combines the best of ThunderClan with the best of WindClan," added Stripestar. "We already have a name for it. I have dreamed it for many nights now."

He looked at Galestar for permission to continue. She gave it with a dip of her head.

"Our new Clan," announced Stripestar, "will be *StormClan*!"

Silence greeted his words, but he pressed on before any cat could complain.

"Together, StormClan will be bigger and stronger than we ever were apart. We will be the greatest Clan ever to hunt in this forest! And if you doubt that StarClan has approved our plan, how do you explain this? We are about to welcome the very first kits who will ever be born into StormClan!"

He bowed his head as Galestar stepped forward and sat up straight.

For a few moments, no cat seemed to understand. Then Pebblenose let out a soft gasp. "Is it true?" The fluffy gray tom's fur seemed to be standing on end.

With a stab of regret, Stripestar remembered what Galestar had told him—how they had longed to have kits themselves when they were mates, but the kits had never come. *This can't be easy for him,* he realized.

Galestar hopped lightly down from the Great Rock, landing at her deputy's side. Standing tall, she allowed him to inspect her belly, then bury his face in her flank. For a moment, Stripestar couldn't tell if he was joyful or upset.

When Pebblenose sat up at last, his eyes were shining with emotion. "I can't believe it . . . ," he breathed, as though talking to himself. Then he shook his pelt and raised his voice to address both Clans. "In the name of StarClan," he cried, "let me be the first to congratulate Galestar and Stripestar." He turned back to his former mate and gently touched her nose with his.

Stripestar cast a glance around the clearing. He still saw confusion, concern, and suspicion on many of the faces present. But most had softened. Some cats were even creeping closer, eager to congratulate the new mother themselves.

Tinyclaw cleared her throat and spoke up next. "If StarClan truly has blessed this plan," she declared, "then I am all for it."

She didn't sound convinced—not exactly—but Stripestar's heart warmed to hear the words of his loyal deputy.

"StormClan!" cried Pebblenose. He threw back his head

and howled it to the nodding boughs above. "StormClan! StormClan! StormClan!"

Gradually, the warriors of WindClan joined in with the chant. Then a pawful of ThunderClan cats began chanting too. Suddenly, in the space of a breath, the whole hollow of Fourtrees rang with it.

"StormClan! StormClan! StormClan!"

Stripestar felt as though a great weight had lifted from his chest. *It's not a secret anymore. And my dream has come true.* He gazed around the clearing in wonder, at his warriors, at his beloved mate Galestar, at his Clan.

StormClan!

The waning moon shed a cold light on the scrubby clumps of grass that grew wild and stubborn among the rocks and boulders around Mothermouth. The five cats had to pick their way carefully up the slope toward the cave, stumbling here and there among loose rocks and scree.

Stripestar's breath puffed out in a gasp, visible in the chilly night air. Seeing the dark, square mouth yawn open among the rocks had sent a jolt through him—though whether it was from fear or excitement, he couldn't tell.

Tonight could change everything.

Three days had passed since he and Galestar had brought their Clans to Fourtrees and announced their plans for the new Clan—StormClan. Since then, the idea had only gathered momentum, like a pinecone tumbling faster and faster from a tree. In both camps, the warriors had a spring in their

steps. They actually seemed . . . *excited.* They spoke often of the battle at Sunningrocks, and how their combined strength had sent RiverClan packing. They had made a plan to live together in ThunderClan's old camp, building more dens to accommodate the new, larger Clan. They had agreed that both Pebblenose and Tinyclaw would remain deputies, to help manage so many cats.

It was just what Stripestar had hoped for. Yet still, an uneasy feeling lingered in the pit of his stomach. It was the kits that had swayed them all—the promise of the first warriors who would be born into StormClan. *Surely they are a gift from StarClan—a sign that they approve of our decision.* Stripestar wanted to believe it, more than anything. *But tonight we'll hear what StarClan really thinks.*

"Stripestar?" Stoneflower, ThunderClan's young ginger medicine cat, butted him gently with his head. Abruptly, Stripestar realized that his companions had all stopped, looking to the rear of their party. Galestar shifted anxiously from paw to paw, and the WindClan medicine cat, Goldenleaf, stood tense and quivering.

Turning, Stripestar saw that it was Kestrelwing they were staring at. He had come to a halt farther down the slope, hackles risen. He leaned back with his whole body, as though he could sense something terrible hidden among the shadows within the cave.

"What's wrong, Kestrelwing?" asked Stripestar uneasily.

The ancient medicine cat shook his graying pelt. "Just a feeling," he muttered. "A bad one."

"You don't think StarClan will give us their blessing," Galestar mewed quietly.

It wasn't a question. Old Kestrelwing had made no secret of his doubts, skulking around the ThunderClan camp in a black mood ever since the meeting at Fourtrees.

"I do not *think*. I *know* they will not," he answered bluntly. "Five Clans. There have always been five. What you two seek to do is . . ." He shook his head sadly.

Galestar shot Stripestar an exasperated look. "There are no longer five Clans, in any case," she muttered. "If that were so important, perhaps *some* cats should have fought harder to keep SkyClan in the forest while they still had the chance."

"We'll find out soon enough what StarClan has to say," meowed Stripestar, smothering a flash of irritation at Kestrelwing. *Older cats always become so set in their ways,* he reminded himself. *Of course he's going to have doubts.* "Follow me."

He set off again, slipping into Mothermouth without even a glance over his shoulder, and hoping no cat could tell how hard his heart was hammering in his chest.

It was darker than he'd expected inside the cave, the air stale and musty, the stone icy cold beneath his paws. Goldenleaf guided them to a narrow opening among the rocks. Then Stripestar led the way, his fur prickling as he felt rough stone brushing against his fur on either side. The tunnel was barely wide enough to allow a single cat to pass. His every instinct screamed at him to turn back. But he forced himself to walk on, the rough, uneven ground sloping downward as they descended into the depths beneath Highstones.

Gradually, the air began to smell fresher, and a silver light filtered into the tunnel from somewhere up ahead, making the rocks glisten like crystal. Stripestar hastened, almost running into the light, until with a great rush of relief he emerged into a familiar rocky chamber.

Tonight the high-ceilinged cavern was bathed in the cold white light of moonhigh, streaming down from the jagged hole up above and reflecting from the gigantic slab of crystal that rose from the center of the space, as big as a boulder and glittering like fast-flowing water on a sunny day.

The Moonstone!

It took Stripestar's breath away, just as it had the very first night he had seen it, when he had received his nine lives and his new name and become the leader of ThunderClan. *Our ancestors blessed me then,* he remembered. *Will they bless me now that I seek to become leader of a new Clan entirely?*

Stripestar felt a calmness descend across him, as though he could almost sense the spirits of his ancestors already. His companions emerged from the tunnel, and he saw Galestar's blue eyes twinkling in wonder in the reflected moonlight. His heart swelled with love. *StarClan will agree to this.* He felt suddenly sure of it. *How could they not?*

The five cats spread through the cavern, taking up positions around the Moonstone. Kestrelwing's face was glowing white as he nodded to them all, and each in turn placed their nose against the crystal. Stripestar gasped as he touched the Moonstone, felt its coldness seep into him. It chilled him to his very bones, yet it brought with it a deep, peaceful feeling too.

"StarClan!" Kestrelwing's voice boomed and echoed from the rocks. "We seek your wisdom. Spirits of our ancestors, we implore you. Show yourselves. Speak with us. We are here. And we are listening."

The echoes of Kestrelwing's cry died slowly away. *Nothing's happening,* thought Stripestar. Then all at once the Moonstone began to shimmer, shining even brighter than before.

"We hear you."

Stripestar's pelt prickled at the voice. It came from behind him—yet at the same time from inside his own head. A stern voice, full of strength and confidence. A voice he had heard before, in his dreams.

Turning away from the Moonstone, Stripestar understood at once that they were no longer alone. In the shadows around the edge of the cavern, four cats sat calmly, sparkling in the moonlight as though stars twinkled across their fur.

Stripestar could hardly breathe. Close by, he heard Galestar let out a soft gasp of wonder.

"We hear you," came the voice of Thunderstar once more. "And we know why you are here."

"You came to ask for our blessing," added Windstar. The sleek brown cat drew herself up, her eyes blazing as they fixed on Galestar. "But you should have come begging for forgiveness."

Stripestar's stomach dropped. "What . . . what do you mean?"

"Your ancestors risked everything," Thunderstar told him. "They gave their lives for the Clans. Now you would turn your

back on all of it. You would bring destruction on ThunderClan, and on WindClan too."

"No!" cried Stripestar. His pelt was crawling with desperation. *They don't understand! How can they not understand?* "That's not what we're doing! Not at all. We're trying to *strengthen* our Clans—both of them. StormClan is—"

"StormClan is nothing!" hissed Shadowstar. She narrowed her eyes, peering at him so closely that Stripestar felt as though she could see right into his heart. "Search your soul, Stripestar. You claim to be doing this for the good of the Clans. Yet your actions will bring turmoil. They will upset the balance of the five. One Clan for each petal of the Blazing Star. You know this, Stripestar."

"There are five Clans no longer." It was Galestar who spoke, ears pricked, defiance in her eyes. Even amid his despair, Stripestar was overcome by admiration for the she-cat who dared stand up to their own ancestors, the very first leaders of their Clans. It made him feel a little less like a kit being scolded by his elders. "SkyClan has already left the forest!" Galestar continued. "Without them, there *is* no balance. And yet the Clans have been thriving—the ones that remain. We achieved all that, *together*. What harm can it bring to join forces, then?"

"You came to seek our counsel," rumbled Thunderstar. "Now you seem determined to ignore it."

"Let there be no doubt," Windstar declared. "StarClan does not condone this union. And if you proceed, you will walk in darkness all your moons."

"StarClan will guide your paw steps no more," added Riverstar, "and your nine lives will be forfeited."

Stripestar sank back onto his haunches. He felt suddenly hollow, as empty as the spirits who stood before him. *They were never going to agree to this.* He felt as though he'd known it all along and had only been pretending to himself. Now he saw the truth at last. *StormClan was an empty dream after all. Never any more than that.*

It had all been for nothing.

Then his gaze fell on Galestar, so full of passion, facing these legendary cats without even blinking. Out of nowhere, anger flickered in his belly. *She's just as great as they are. Perhaps even greater.* And he couldn't let her down.

Stripestar sprang up on all four paws, arching his back and staring at the cats of StarClan each in turn, ignoring the thunder of his heart. "Very well," he purred. "I had hoped that you would be able to understand our good intentions. Now I see that I was sadly mistaken. I do not accept your decision, and so I see only one path for us. StormClan must part ways with StarClan."

Kestrelwing made a dreadful sound—part gasp, part wail. Stoneflower and Goldenleaf edged back, fearful, tails between their legs.

"Please," Kestrelwing mewed. "Stripestar, this is foolishness! You must reconsider. You must! Galestar? There is still time to turn back, still time to—"

"No. There is no going back. Not for us." Galestar spoke in a flat voice. Her gaze met Stripestar's, sad and determined. "I am with kits."

"And I will not allow them to grow up in another Clan,

without their father," added Stripestar, taking courage from his mate. "They will be StormClan kits, whatever StarClan may say." He felt dizzy and light-headed. *But I've made my choice.* He had already made it, many moons ago. He stood side by side with Galestar, daring StarClan to argue.

The cats of StarClan fell silent, a deep sadness etched into their faces. *They knew, too,* Stripestar realized. *They knew we had chosen this path, and that there was no way of turning us from it.*

At length, Riverstar heaved a great sigh, and spoke. "So be it."

A blinding flash of white light seared through the cavern.

Stripestar yelped and leaped away from the Moonstone, stumbling in shock. Invisible claws had seized at his heart, squeezing, ripping, wrenching at his chest. He fell, jerking in agony. *Am I dying?*

As he howled, he was dimly aware of Thunderstar's voice, sounding in his head. "I revoke the gift that was freely given to you."

My nine lives . . . They're taking them away from me!

A jolt of horror shot through him, even amid the agony.

Rolling, still writhing with pain, he saw that Galestar had fallen too, her panicked yowls making his own heart ache even worse than before. *The kits,* he thought suddenly. *Can they survive this?*

He wanted to call out to her, but the pain was too great.

Galestar . . . my love . . .

He couldn't reach her. He couldn't comfort her. Shadows spread though his mind, like night falling, until all at once there was nothing. Nothing but darkness.

* * *

When Stripestar awoke, the moonlight had vanished. All was still, silent, and cold.

Groaning, he stumbled to his feet. He swayed, groggy and unsteady, until he remembered, with a lurch of his heart.

Galestar!

He staggered, trying to focus. He was in the cavern of the Moonstone. There it was, a lifeless lump of rock now that the moon had passed. And there, lying next to it . . .

"No!" He stumbled to her, collapsed by her side, and buried his face in her flank. "Please! Galestar, don't be—"

"It's all right." Her voice was a dry croak, yet still it was the sweetest thing he had ever heard. "I'm safe. The kits are safe." She lifted her head to nuzzle against him, and for a few precious moments there was nothing in the world but the meager warmth between them.

"I . . . I can't believe it," Galestar breathed when they finally broke apart. Her ears were flattened, her whiskers drooping with despair. "StarClan . . . our nine lives . . . did I dream it all?"

Stripestar shook his head. "It was no dream. StarClan has left us."

Forever.

"And now we know," muttered Kestrelwing, grimly. "Now we know what they think of your plan."

Stripestar had almost forgotten about the medicine cats. Now he saw the three of them, huddling close on the far

side of the chamber and staring at him and Galestar. Stoneflower and Goldenleaf looked wide-eyed with pity. *Or is it horror?* But in Kestrelwing's rheumy yellow eyes, he could only see a deep, deep sadness. *He knew. He warned us. And we didn't listen.*

"I hope you are satisfied with your choice," sighed Kestrelwing. "You told StarClan that there is no going back. And now . . . now I'm afraid that you are right."

Chapter 7

The day had been unpleasantly warm for newleaf, and the night brought no respite. The air was still and heavy with a storm that refused to break.

High on the Great Rock, Galestar squirmed uncomfortably, her pelt hot and itching, her breathing tight and labored. She longed to run through cool, damp grass. To fling herself into a pool of cold water. *To be anywhere but here.* She felt almost as trapped as she had in the tunnel that led to the Moonstone the night that StarClan had passed judgment on her, on Stripestar, and on their unborn kits.

But there's no escaping what must be done here tonight.

". . . and we welcome Thornpaw as a full warrior of ShadowClan," Snakestar droned on, "to be known from this day forward as Thornwhisker. May StarClan guide his paw steps every day. . . ."

Me next. Galestar's heart pounded as she awaited her turn to speak before the Gathering. *Surely they all know already. Surely they can tell.*

To Galestar, there was nothing more obvious in the world than the litter of kits growing inside her. Her thoughts and

dreams for them consumed her every waking moment. How else was she to distract herself from the memories she couldn't face? The cruel words of StarClan. The loss of her nine lives. And the unease that had spread through the cats of StormClan when the medicine cats had announced what had happened at the Moonstone . . .

Moons seemed to pass before Snakestar bowed his head at last and lay down flat on the rock. *Finally.* In the clearing below, several dozen pairs of eyes gleamed up from the shadows, fixed on Galestar. She felt Stripestar shifting beside her. She sensed his love for her. *And his fear.*

With a heavy heart, Galestar rose to her forepaws and cleared her throat. "I have news," she announced. She saw the cats of RiverClan and ShadowClan waiting patiently to hear of the kits who had been born, the apprentices who had become warriors, the elders who had passed on to StarClan. And she realized, with a tightening of her stomach, *They really have no idea.*

"WindClan is no more." She spat out the words before she had time to consider what they meant. "ThunderClan is no more. We have joined together. We are now one Clan. A new Clan. StormClan."

A stunned silence stretched out in the hollow.

Whenever she had dreamed of this moment, tossing and turning in the nest she shared with Stripestar, Galestar had imagined at least a pawful of StormClan cats voicing their support. Instead they all held their tongues, as though waiting to see what would happen.

Then there was uproar.

"This is outrageous!" screamed Ravencry above the din of yowling ShadowClan warriors.

"Bullies!" yelled a wiry young RiverClan warrior whom Galestar half recognized from the battle at Sunningrocks. "What, do you think you can steal even more territory this way?"

Still no StormClan cat spoke up. Galestar cast her gaze among them, but none would meet her eyes. Even Pebblenose just hung his head, flicking his tail with embarrassment. *They seemed so sure it was a good idea,* she thought, sadly. *At least . . . until our trip to the Moonstone.*

"Explain yourselves," called Floatweed as the cats began to simmer down at last. "Help us understand. How is it that StarClan can approve of such a thing?"

Galestar's heart sank. *The one question we hoped not to have to answer.* She shot a glance at Stripestar, but her mate looked just as lost as she felt.

Pinebrush, the white medicine cat of ShadowClan, prowled forward. She narrowed ice-blue eyes at Galestar. "I see," she purred softly. "StarClan didn't agree to this after all. I am sure Kestrelwing would have insisted that you journey to the Moonstone to commune with StarClan. Which can mean only one thing . . . Our ancestors have *forbidden* it!"

A chorus of gasps and anxious muttering spread through the Gathering like a forest fire.

"No!" insisted Stripestar, springing to his paws. "They didn't forbid it. Not . . . *exactly.* They only need time! When

they see how well it will work, even StarClan will understand. They'll . . . they'll change their minds, and—"

The rest of his words were drowned out by wails and yowls from every cat—not just from RiverClan and ShadowClan, but from StormClan cats, too.

Amid the chaos, Galestar shrank back like a chastened apprentice. She didn't know what more she could say. She felt defeated. Worst of all, *Stripestar* looked defeated. *I've never seen him that way. At least not for long.* The thought gave her a little comfort.

At last, Birchstar held up a paw and brought the Gathering to an uneasy silence.

Galestar dreaded what the RiverClan leader might have to say. But she was astonished to see a softness in the old she-cat's gaze, so unlike her usual defiance. *She feels sorry for us,* Galestar realized, with a sickening lurch of her stomach.

"Isn't it time to tell the truth before the Gathering?" Birchstar asked gently. "Galestar. Stripestar. It's plain for every cat to see that you're in love. That's why you want to do this—to be together. I'm sure many of us can understand that. But . . ." She shook her head. "But you are not a pair of apprentices, with no responsibility to any cat. You are leaders! You have Clans to think of. Great, proud Clans that have endured in this forest for many generations. No cat wants to see an end to WindClan *or* ThunderClan, no matter what bad blood we may have had between us in the past. Even more so, with SkyClan gone! You both know this isn't right. You both know it, deep in your hearts. Now, you've made a mistake. StarClan

knows, we all make mistakes! But it's not too late to put it right. It's not too late to go back to the way things were."

Galestar's heart fluttered. There was such *kindness* in Birchstar's gaze—*even after we took Sunningrocks from her Clan*—that for a moment she almost wished the RiverClan leader were right. That it wasn't too late.

But it is.

Stripestar shook his head. "You are a wise cat, Birchstar," he admitted. "But we will not turn back. StormClan is our future. And . . ." He faltered, then drew himself up. "And I'm pleased to announce that we are already expecting the birth of its very first kits."

It should have been a cause for celebration. But instead, another deathly silence fell across the whole Gathering. *They understand now, at last,* thought Galestar. *There is no turning back. Not for us.*

"So there it is," muttered Snakestar at last. "The end of two once-great Clans." He sighed deeply and shook his head. "I fear for the pair of you, and for any cat foolish enough to follow you. But make no mistake. If this *StormClan* of yours tries hunting on ShadowClan territory—or RiverClan's—we will strike back hard and fast, and with the blessing of StarClan, whom you in your folly have chosen to reject."

"We will do nothing of the kind!" snapped Stripestar. "StormClan has no need of your scraps!"

But Snakestar had already turned from them with a swish of his tail. "This Gathering is over," he called over his shoulder as he vaulted down from the Great Rock. "ShadowClan! With me."

Galestar turned, hoping for a kind word from Birchstar. But the RiverClan leader was leaving too, already clambering down into the clearing to join her Clan.

Together—*and alone*—Galestar and Stripestar sat and watched the two Clans silently stream up the slopes and out of the hollow, no cat offering a parting word to the warriors of StormClan.

Quite suddenly, despair welled up from deep inside Galestar.

"It's all right," muttered Stripestar under his breath. "Everything will be all right."

"Will it?" Galestar couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice. "They don't trust us. Snakestar believes we'll try to steal their territory from—"

"Which we won't!" Stripestar interrupted.

"Oh, but what does it matter? Stripestar, they think so badly of us! Birchstar, too. They think we'd do anything for ourselves, at any cost to our Clan." *And what if they're right?* Galestar stamped on the thought at once, as though crushing a spider with her forepaw.

Below, StormClan was milling around uncertainly, waiting for some signal from their leaders. *They look scared,* thought Galestar. *Lost. Just like us.*

"We knew this wasn't going to be easy," Stripestar reminded her. "But I promise you . . . everything will work out." His tail curled around her, pulling her closer. And in spite of everything, Galestar felt a little warmth kindle in her heart at the soft touch of the tom she loved more than any other she had ever known.

Perhaps he's right, she told herself. *Perhaps when the kits come. Perhaps the kits will make everything better.*

Galestar squirmed, rolling over onto her left flank—but it was no more comfortable than her right. *StarClan! What I wouldn't give for just one full night of peace.* The nest of deep, soft moss ought to have been the perfect spot for an afternoon nap. But lately, nothing seemed to bring Galestar and her swollen belly any comfort at all. She almost wished the kits would come right now. That it would all be over.

Shafts of sunshine pierced the bramble covering of the ThunderClan nursery. *No—the StormClan nursery,* she reminded herself. The unseasonably sticky warmth of newleaf had stretched into early greenleaf, and the heat was unrelenting, even at night. What little sleep Galestar could get was haunted by broken dreams of rain: splashing in puddles and leaping through spray from the river.

Most of all she missed the cool of her old camp on the moor, where the wind whistled through the heather and swept through the bracken, even at the height of greenleaf.

But it's better this way, staying all together in the old ThunderClan camp.

Here, they were closer to the hunting grounds of Sunningrocks. The cats from ThunderClan had long been muttering darkly about not wanting to sleep out in the open. *And besides . . . how else is StormClan going to truly become one single Clan?*

At least she was alone in the nursery, which was a greater privilege than any other cat had been afforded. The camp was

overflowing with twice as many cats as it could comfortably hold. Most days, Galestar heard the warriors working hard outside to build more dens. But the heat was making every cat slow and peevish, and the work was going at a snail's pace.

If I could only get out there and help. But she was afraid to move, so heavy with her litter, and Stripestar had to manage everything on his own.

Galestar lashed her tail with frustration. This wasn't the start she'd imagined for their new Clan. And from the worry and exhaustion she could read in Stripestar's drooping ears and tail whenever he came to visit her, she could tell it wasn't what he had dreamed of, either.

The brambles rustled and Kestrelwing pushed his way into the den, a bunch of herbs dangling from his mouth. He set them down and began to sort them into little piles, nudging a pawful of yellow and white flowers toward Galestar. "Feverfew," he explained. "To keep the body cool."

Galestar fell on them, gratefully chewing the sharp-smelling flowers, leaves and all. "What's going on out there?" she asked when she had swallowed them all down. "Have the hunting patrols returned?"

"Don't worry about that," Kestrelwing chided her. "Leave the patrols to Stripestar. Everything is all right. Your task is simply to relax, get as much rest as—"

"I do nothing *but* rest!" Galestar snapped. "Forgive me," she muttered, forcing herself to lie down. Her back was aching again. *Not that it ever really stopped.* "It's difficult, being stuck in here."

Kestrelwing dipped his head. "Forgive *me*. All is well. The cats are content."

Galestar couldn't help snorting with laughter in spite of her discomfort. "Now I *know* that you're lying."

Kestrelwing heaved a weary sigh as he offered her some daisy leaves. "Very well. It's true that the mood in camp is . . . uneasy. Some have still not quite come to terms with the message that StarClan gave us that night at the Moonstone."

Including you, thought Galestar. But she accepted the daisy leaves and let the old medicine cat continue.

"Time might have healed those wounds," Kestrelwing mused. "But alas, since then things have only become harder. The camp is overcrowded, and I hear that . . ." He hesitated.

"Speak up. What do you hear?"

"Well, our hunting patrols out on the moor have reported sightings of ShadowClan cats. RiverClan, too. It seems that, now that the camp there has been abandoned, every cat believes they have the right to hunt on WindClan's old territory. And they blame us for the shortages of prey on their own territories."

Galestar ground her teeth with frustration. "There's plenty of prey in the forest, though, isn't there?"

"If only there were," Kestrelwing replied. "The river has been running low, and prey has been scampering deeper into the forest in search of water. A little rain might help. But of course, we've not had a drop."

Not since the day we revealed our plans for StormClan, Galestar remembered grimly. "You're telling me that the Clan is going hungry?" she asked.

"I'm afraid so."

Galestar groaned. She didn't need Kestrelwing to tell her what that meant. The hungrier StormClan became, the more miserable they would grow. The more they would start to believe that their leaders had made a dreadful mistake, and that StarClan really had abandoned them.

"At least we have safety in numbers," Galestar murmured, trying to make the best of it. "With such a mighty Clan, no badger nor fox will ever dare attack us."

"Most certainly." Kestrelwing nodded. "Although . . . it's not badgers or foxes we must fear, but the other Clans. There is a rumor that Birchstar and Snakestar have been meeting in secret since the Gathering. And some harsh words have been exchanged between our patrols and those of ShadowClan and RiverClan. Let us hope that things improve soon . . . before those words turn to violence."

"But that's so *unfair*!" Galestar grumbled. She knew she sounded like a petulant young kit, but she couldn't help it. "We've done nothing to them! Stripestar has made sure that no StormClan cat has strayed from our own hunting grounds. And *still* they think the worst of us!"

Kestrelwing cleared his throat, shuffling his paws awkwardly. "I'm afraid it's not a question of what you *are* doing, but what you *might* do. Consider it—StormClan is the biggest, strongest Clan by far. It's only natural for the other Clans to be afraid of what you might do, what territory you might take a fancy to. Especially considering what happened at . . . well . . ."

"Sunningrocks," finished Galestar with a sigh. *He's right.* And suddenly she felt terrible that the old medicine cat was

having to walk softly around her. "Thank you, Kestrelwing. Stripestar told me you were a wise cat. I can see for myself now that it's true."

Kestrelwing dipped his head modestly. "Perhaps a little thyme, too," he murmured, picking up the strong-smelling herb and dropping it beside Galestar's head. "It helps . . . with anxiety." He grunted as he began to collect up his herbs once again. "I could have sworn I'd brought some borage too . . . That Goldenleaf keeps coming into my herb stores and rearranging everything. She doesn't seem to understand that I know where everything is!"

Galestar stifled an amused *mrrow*. "I'll have a word with her," she promised. "But you'll have to find a way to share the den somehow. Perhaps if you—"

A sudden stab of pain in her flank stole her breath away. She winced, panting.

"Again?" asked Kestrelwing, looking up sharply.

Galestar nodded, unable to speak. The pains had come often over the last few moons, always without warning. "Is it . . . normal?" she gasped when she could speak again.

"We'll keep an eye on it," Kestrelwing promised.

Galestar couldn't help noticing that he hadn't answered the question. But if it *wasn't* normal, then why was she suffering so much?

"Perhaps it's a punishment," she wondered out loud. "Perhaps StarClan is making me suffer for what Stripestar and I have done." She tried to sound relaxed, but it wasn't the first time the thought had occurred to her.

"Few pregnancies are easy," Kestrelwing told her. "Many are hard indeed. But . . ." He looked away as though embarrassed. "But you are strong, Galestar. One of the strongest cats I have ever known. If any cat can handle it . . . you can."

Galestar was taken aback. She had often felt as though the old ThunderClan cat was a little wary around her. *That's the kindest thing he's ever said to me!* Her heart softened.

She was about to reply when she caught a scent that made her ears prick up. She half rose, all her pain forgotten. "Is that . . . smoke?"

Kestrelwing tasted the air. His eyes widened.

Glancing over Kestrelwing's shoulder, Galestar felt her heart jolt in her chest. Above the treetops, the sky was stained orange, as though it were sundown. *But it's the middle of the day. . . .*

"Fire!" An apprentice came tumbling into the nursery, paws flailing with panic. "Twolegs were burning something," she gabbled, "and the trees caught fire! It's spreading, getting closer! We have to escape!"

Galestar tried to spring upright, but her joints groaned, and the weight of her belly dragged her down again. She panted, heart pounding with alarm. *How close is the fire? Are we all in danger?* Outside the nursery, she could hear scrabbling paws, yowls, and caterwauls as cats scurried every which way. *They don't know what to do!* She had to help. She had to be a leader. But how was she supposed to do that if she couldn't even stand up?

The brambles rustled again, and Pebblenose thrust his head into the nursery, looking grim. Over his shoulder, Galestar

saw several WindClan warriors, hackles raised. "Galestar!" he cried. "Thank StarClan. We have to get you out of here!"

"We have to get *every* cat out," Galestar shot back. She puffed, steeling herself as best she could. *Nothing for it.* Her body was telling her to stay still. But she had a responsibility to her Clan. With a grunt, she rose.

Kestrelwing looked panicked. "I really don't think . . . I mean, in your condition, you mustn't—"

"I'm a leader of StormClan," Galestar interrupted him. "And I intend to lead it." She gritted her teeth, breathing deep through another startling wave of pain. "We'll head to the old WindClan camp," she gasped. "We'll be safe there, out of the forest."

Pebblenose looked almost as worried as Kestrelwing, but he pushed his way into the den to help. With Pebblenose supporting her on one side, and Kestrelwing on the other, Galestar staggered out of the nursery and into the open.

Cats were running in all directions, some carrying kits in their mouths, others helping elders. All of them looked tense and wide-eyed with fear. The scent of smoke was stronger than ever out here. A haze hung in the air and stung Galestar's eyes. Then she spotted the fire itself, flickering tongues of flame licking up high above the treetops, not far from the nursery. *It's even closer than I feared!*

"Where's Stripestar?" she meowed. No cat answered. "You!" she called to a pair of warriors scampering past. *ThunderClan warriors,* she realized. "Make sure the elders are all out of the den. Head for the moor!"

The warriors looked at each other, fearful and confused. "But . . . Stripestar already ordered us to make for the river."

"What do you mean?" snapped Pebblenose.

"He told us we'd be safe in the water," the other warrior explained, his voice dangerously close to a snarl of defiance. "Find the lowest spot in the river and cross there. Those were his orders. The fire won't cross the river, he told us."

Galestar growled with frustration as the warriors ran off. *They still think they're ThunderClan cats.* But on the other paw, how were they supposed to know what to do if they had two leaders giving different instructions?

"Where is Stripestar?" she howled again. "Some cat find him!"

Pebblenose directed a few of the warriors he'd brought, and they all shot off in different directions in search of StormClan's other leader.

This is chaos, Galestar thought despairingly. Half the Clan seemed to be heading for the river, while the other half was trying to set off for the moor. *We have to act together!*

"Stripestar!" she called. She stumbled to the leaders' den and thrust her muzzle inside. *Empty.*

"Galestar, please . . . ," Pebblenose begged. "Think of your kits! We can handle this. You mustn't push yourself too hard, or—"

She cut him off with a harsh snort. "Mustn't *push myself?* Our camp is about to burn to the ground! And where in all of Silverpelt is Stripestar?"

Suddenly, a brown tabby came bolting from the smoke

beyond the camp, leaped down into the hollow, and landed on all fours, kicking up dust.

Galestar had never before felt such a rush of relief at seeing her mate alive and well.

"Stripestar!" she scolded. "Where were you?"

"The river," he panted. His eyes were wild with panic. "I thought we could get across. But the fire . . . it's already spread to the other side. I don't know what to do!"

"I do," Galestar told him, firmly. "We head for the old WindClan camp. *All* of us. We have to get out of the forest, where there are no trees. Then we'll be safe."

"Of course . . ." Stripestar nodded. "I should have thought of that." He leaped up onto the great boulder in which he and Galestar had their den, and called out across the camp, in a booming voice. "StormClan! To the moor!"

"To the moor!" The shout went up, all around. And suddenly, all the cats were streaming in one direction. Galestar's heart lifted. *Finally!* Then a fresh stab of pain made her flinch and bend double. *No time for this . . . We have to get out of here!*

With Pebblenose and Kestrelwing holding her up on either side, Galestar joined the river of cats flooding out of the camp. She could feel the heat of the fire at their tails, the smoke prickling her nostrils and stinging her eyes. *It will destroy our camp,* she realized with a lurch of horror. But there would be time for mourning later. For now, she had to save herself, her Clan, and her kits.

"Keep going!" wheezed Kestrelwing.

Galestar could see that the aging medicine cat needed help

himself. "Crowflight!" she called, spotting her littermate. Galestar's sister understood at once and hurried over to assist Kestrelwing.

"Come on. For the kits." The familiar voice of Stripestar was suddenly at her side. He took Kestrelwing's place, and together they ran on, through the forest, going as fast as Galestar's swollen belly would allow them. StormClan surged all around them, a frightened mass of cats stumbling through brambles, weaving among the trees.

Galestar tripped on a root and almost fell, but Pebblenose caught her. The scent of prey was in her nostrils, and she spotted squirrels scuffling in the undergrowth, even a vole. All of them fleeing, just like StormClan. *No time for hunting now.* She could still hear the crackle of flames, still feel the warmth through her pelt, even as they hurried on through the forest.

"Look out!"

The sudden yowl made her fur stand up straight. Slowly—too slowly—she became aware of the rustling overhead. Glancing up, she saw a rotten branch come tumbling, plummeting down in a flurry of leaves.

Her heart froze. Too late, she scrabbled, trying to skid to a halt. But the branch came thumping down in front of her, and she slammed into it. A squeal escaped her, as something sharp punctured her pelt, left her gasping with fresh pain. She sat down hard.

"Galestar? Galestar, are you all right?" Stripestar's voice was tight with worry.

She hauled herself upright. "I'm . . . all right . . . Just a

branch." She was bleeding from her flank, where a sharp, jutting bit of wood had gouged her. *It's not deep,* she told herself. *The kits are safe.*

Stripestar nudged her gently with his head, guiding her around the fallen branch, onward through the forest.

Galestar's head was spinning. She felt dizzy, oddly faint. The Clan had slowed to a brisk walk now, and they were traveling through a patch of the forest that she didn't recognize.

"We're nearly there," Stripestar promised her. "You're doing so well, Galestar. We'll be on the moor in no time. Can you hear? The fire's behind us. Far behind. We did it, Galestar, we—"

A wave of agony came thrumming through her body out of nowhere, and she let out a wail that drowned out the rest of her mate's words. *Great StarClan, it hurts!*

"What's wrong?" As she sank to the ground, she became aware of Kestrelwing's anxious face, hovering above. "Are you wounded?"

It was all Galestar could do to shake her head.

"What, then?" asked Stripestar wildly. "What's the matter?"

"The . . . kits . . . ," she gasped. "I . . . I think they're coming."

Another wave of pain ripped down her side like claws tearing at her guts. She let out a yowl.

Not now. Please, not now . . .

Stripestar was calling out, gathering the medicine cats. The Clan had shambled to a halt now, and a space cleared around Galestar, anxious eyes fixed on her. *Have to be . . . strong . . . ,* she told herself fiercely. Pebblenose lifted her with Stripestar's help. They supported her, half carrying her to a dip filled with

bracken at the foot of a small rise. *This is it. This is where my kits will be born.* The thought sent a thrill of excitement through her—and of fear.

Kestrelwing was bustling around her, issuing instructions to the younger medicine cats. "I need herbs. Quickly! Find me some raspberry leaves."

"It's too late for that," Galestar told him. She felt strangely calm. "They're coming, Kestrelwing. They're coming now."

Another wave of pain came searing, twisting her body, ripping another screech from deep inside her. As she collapsed back, panting rapidly, she couldn't avoid the surge of anxiety. *Is it really supposed to hurt this much?*

She saw Stripestar conferring with Kestrelwing and caught a snatch of their conversation. ". . . too soon . . . ," Kestrelwing was saying, and an icy chill crept across her from head to tail-tip. Stripestar looked stricken, his eyes wide and fearful.

Still, Galestar could feel the eyes of StormClan upon her. *I have to show courage,* she reminded herself. *I have to show them how their leader gives birth.*

Stoneflower came to her side to offer her a stick stripped of bark. "It's the best we can do now," he mewed in apology. But Galestar accepted it gratefully. She locked her teeth tight around it, readying herself.

Another powerful surge gripped her body, carrying her away on a new wave of agony. Some cat was keening wildly. Then she realized—*it's me.* The sound was coming from her. Her jaws ached, she had bitten so deeply into the wood. Splinters cut into her gums. She lay gasping as the pain subsided, gathering her strength once again.

The world seemed to fade away, leaving nothing but pain. It was all that mattered. Wave after wave of it. Each one impossibly more dreadful than the last.

Galestar felt so faint. She began to wonder if she was dreaming. None of this felt real. As though through a fog, she perceived cats moving around her, exchanging anxious words. *Pebblenose. Kestrelwing. Stripestar . . .*

The pain was building again, but this time she could scarcely feel it. She was drifting like a leaf on the river.

"Galestar. Can you hear me?"

Kestrelwing's voice. It was thick with emotion. Galestar blinked. *I must have passed out,* she realized. She tried to move, but the medicine cat laid a gentle paw on her. "It's over. It's done."

Something's wrong. She realized it at once, with a cold rush of certainty. *I can't hear their mewing.*

"My kits," Galestar managed to croak. "I want to see my kits."

She tried to get up, but there were more paws on her now, cats nuzzling at her flank, holding her close. Above all, there was Stripestar. His eyes glimmered with grief as he touched his forehead gently against hers.

"I'm so sorry, Galestar." He could barely get the words out. "I'm so, so sorry."

When at last she could summon the strength, Galestar rose, leaning heavily on Stripestar. Together they hobbled to the nest of heather and moss that Goldenleaf had made.

There they lay—three small, cold bundles. *My kits.*

Galestar howled with anguish all over again, shuddering against her mate's pelt. Then Stripestar began to wail along with her, great heaving cries that racked both their bodies.

All around them stood StormClan, their heads bowed, their tails between their legs. No cat spoke a word. *What must they think now?* Galestar wondered. She knew the despair of their leaders must be upsetting them. *But what else are we to do?*

All the time and effort it had taken, for the two Clans to begin to work as one . . . and Galestar knew, deep down, that they had all been driven by the promise of those kits. It was the kits that had convinced them about StormClan in the first place. The kits that had made them all believe that perhaps they had done the right thing after all, even if StarClan opposed it.

And now . . .

At the edge of her vision, Galestar saw one tortoiseshell warrior muttering to her mate, "It's a message. A punishment from StarClan."

"Shut your mouth!" snarled Pebblenose, rounding on the unfortunate warrior with his neck fur bristling. "How dare you? Do you not see our leaders' suffering?" He prowled forward, hissing, and for a moment Galestar feared a fight might break out.

"That's enough!" she choked out. "Go, all of you. Rest a while."

As the cats reluctantly broke apart, casting sorrowful glances back at their leaders, Galestar clung to Stripestar.

Together they held each other upright.

But the tortoiseshell warrior's words still lingered in Galestar's mind. *My own fears, spoken out loud.* And perhaps it was true. Perhaps this really was a punishment. *The first cats to be born to StormClan. Cats that were never meant to be. A Clan that was never meant to be.*

Over Stripestar's shoulder, she could see Kestrelwing and the other medicine cats huddling around her poor kits, preparing them for burial.

The first argument of the day had begun early, not long after dawn. Tumbletail, the black tom from ThunderClan, had woken every cat up by dragging a gigantic heap of heather in from the moor. Frecklepelt helped him gather it together, right in the center of the camp.

Galestar lay, watching wearily from beneath her old gorse-bush den, with a familiar sinking feeling. *Here we go again.*

"You woke my kits!" snarled Spotnose.

"I don't know how they could sleep in the first place!" Tumbletail shot back. "I don't know how *any* of you WindClan cats can sleep out here, with the wind scouring your pelts night and day! I'm sick of it."

"We're going to build a proper den," added Frecklepelt. "Like you should have done, moons ago!"

"You ThunderClan cats need to toughen up," growled Thrushcall. "Moaning that you're freezing cold, just because of a little bit of wind—"

"And you lazy WindClan cats need to get up and help. This den won't build itself!"

"You've put it right in the middle of the camp! Every cat will be tripping over it!"

"You think we liked living in *your* old camp, with the trees creaking every night?"

Galestar buried her head in her paws, trying to blot it all out. *By the stars, will these foolish quarrels never end?*

It had been a quarter moon since the fire. *Since my kits were born.* The whole Clan had moved into WindClan's old camp, but now they seemed less like one Clan than ever. Squabbles were breaking out day and night between the cats who had been WindClan and those who had been ThunderClan.

Galestar knew she should go out there and break up the fight before things became serious. *But only half the cats would listen to me!* Tumbletail and Frecklepelt would find some reason to convince themselves that she was favoring the old WindClan cats.

There was no getting around it—StormClan simply wasn't working.

With a groan, Galestar stood and stretched. She'd hardly slept. Not just last night, but for nights on end. Now there was no chance of getting any rest. *I need to get out of here.*

Silently, she slipped out of the leaders' den, hoping no cat would try to stop her. Luckily, Stripestar had already gone out on a dawn hunting patrol with Pebblenose. She loved them both, but they were treading so carefully around her these last few days, watching everything they said. And sometimes she just longed to be alone.

She took a back route, crawling through the thick gorse that surrounded the camp, until she was in the open, with a

fresh wind ruffling her pelt. It felt good to be out on the moor. *No cat looking after me . . . no cat asking how I'm feeling . . . finally!* She'd had her fill of it.

She was still a little shaky on her paws, but the medicine cats were pleased with how far she'd come. *My body's healing.* Even if there was a part of her, deep down, that might never heal.

Rambling along, Galestar let her paws carry her wherever they wanted to go, enjoying the peace and quiet of the warm greenleaf morning. It was only gradually that she began to realize where she was heading. And by then she had already stepped out into a clearing at the edge of the old ThunderClan camp.

It made her heart ache to see the place where they had first tried to make the dream of StormClan a reality; the place where she had lain for so many moons awaiting her kits. *It looks so different now.* In the aftermath of the fire, the ground was dark and charred. The dens had all collapsed, and even the Highrock had been blackened by flames. The trees that surrounded what was left of StormClan's camp were skeletal, their burned and twisted branches overhanging the hollow like the broken rib cage of some monstrous beast.

At least the rain has washed most of the ash away, thought Galestar. On the day after the fire began—*the day after my kits died*—the storm had finally broken. The rain had fallen warm and heavy, a torrent that had doused the flames, all but flooded the parched soil, and swelled the river beyond its banks.

The stench of the smoke hung heavy in the air, a smell that still clung to her pelt, after all these days.

She crept down the slope into the hollow, without quite knowing why. It was a dreadful place. Everything here was blackened and burned and dead.

Except . . .

Galestar squinted, crawling closer as she spotted something amid the destruction. *There!* Poking up from among the ashes was a single white-petaled flower. A snowdrop, hanging its head. And once she had noticed it, Galestar spotted other little green shoots here and there, peeking up amid the destruction, still yet to bloom.

She stood there, quivering, overcome by emotion.

Soon this whole, desolate place will be filled with them—little spots of pure white, like a sea of stars.

It made her think of the long, glorious evenings she had spent with Stripestar in the early days, sharing prey and gazing up at the night sky in wonder. And, like the snowdrop, hope flowered suddenly in the charred remains of her heart.

Renewal. Rebirth.

Perhaps this wasn't the end. Perhaps it wasn't too late for StormClan.

Perhaps they could start again.

Stripestar and Pebblenose had just returned with their hunting patrol when Galestar crested the rise and came sauntering down into the new StormClan camp.

When he saw his mate, Stripestar dropped the vole he was

carrying, his gaze flashing with alarm, followed by concern. Galestar beamed back at him, strode through the camp, and gave him a gentle lick on his ear. She could sense the cats of StormClan watching, felt them warming to their leaders' love.

"For you," he murmured, nudging the vole with his nose.

"I know."

Stripestar looked up at her with shining eyes. "You seem . . . different today."

"I *feel* different," she told him. "For the first time in days, my mind is clear."

She could scent his pride, as his chest swelled, and she knew what he was thinking. *My mate. My Galestar.* She was proud of him too.

And now I know what we must do.

They could no longer be just Stripestar and Galestar. They had to be two halves of one whole. They had to speak with one voice. *Together.* There could be no more confusion, no more WindClan cats and ThunderClan cats.

There could only be StormClan.

CHAPTER 8

"Come on . . . ," muttered Stripestar, watching closely. "You can do it. . . ."

He hardly dared breathe as Hazelfrond clambered up on a rock with the very last blackened branch held tight between her teeth. Slowly, cautiously, she set it down on top of the new makeshift den.

Finished! Stripestar's heart leaped. "It's perfect!" he cried. "Now let's get started on the next—"

With a crack and a rustle, the den collapsed. Charred branches snapped and disintegrated in a cloud of soot, making Hazelfrond jerk back with a yelp of alarm.

As the dust settled, she and Stripestar stared glumly at the wreckage.

"Never mind," Stripestar meowed as brightly as he could manage. "We just need to keep searching. There must be some more solid branches out there in the forest, untouched by the fire."

As Hazelfrond sloped off among the trees again with Fernwhisper, grumbling to each other, Stripestar heaved a deep sigh. He couldn't blame them for feeling frustrated, because that was exactly how he felt. *It's how we all feel.*

So far, they hadn't managed to put up a single den.

Galestar padded over from the other side of the burned-out camp, where she'd been mustering a pawful of warriors to rebuild the nursery. Even she looked dejected, and Stripestar soon saw why. The cats she'd left behind her had abandoned their work and were deep in an argument over the best building materials to use. *Just like they argued every day when we were in WindClan's camp.*

They'd all been so excited about Galestar's idea of moving back here, and for a while it had seemed like the answer to all their problems. But so far nothing had changed—at least not for the better.

"I'm beginning to think we've made a mistake," murmured Galestar, echoing Stripestar's own thoughts. She stretched out beside him, resting a while on the blackened ground. "When I saw the snowdrops blooming here, I thought it might have been some kind of . . . message." She didn't say *from StarClan*. "But now . . . ," she continued. "Now it seems like the camp is beyond salvaging. Perhaps we've come back too soon."

Stripestar cringed at the thought she hadn't voiced. *Perhaps we should go back to WindClan's camp.* He could only imagine the disgust among the old ThunderClan cats if they tried to suggest that.

"We can do it," Stripestar insisted. "No task is too great for StormClan." But the words sounded hollow, even to his own ears. His gaze fell on the fresh-kill pile at the end of the camp, and his heart sank further still. It was pitiful—a few

mice and a pair of rabbits. *Hardly enough to feed the elders, let alone a whole hungry Clan.*

Galestar noticed what he was looking at and shook her head sadly. "Perhaps today's hunting patrols will have more luck."

Stripestar could tell she didn't believe it, though. When they'd escaped the fire, he'd noticed the prey fleeing, along with StormClan. But it seemed that, unlike StormClan, the prey hadn't yet returned. That left them with only WindClan territory to hunt in, and it just wasn't enough.

"This isn't working," he sighed. It was a relief to say it out loud, at least. "We have to try something different."

"Like what?"

Stripestar hesitated, mulling over the idea he'd had the night before while tossing and turning, sleepless, in the leaders' den. "You won't like it. I don't either. But I think it's time we . . . asked for help."

"Help? But who would . . . ?" Her eyes widened, as she guessed his plan. "No."

"The Clan needs to eat." Stripestar shrugged.

"You want us to go begging to Birchstar and Snakestar." Galestar's eyes flashed with defiance. "It will be hopeless! I don't trust Snakestar—he'll demand territory from us, at the very least. And RiverClan . . . Well, we took Sunningrocks from them! They'll laugh us out of their camp."

"Or worse," muttered Stripestar gravely. "They'll offer us fish."

Galestar snorted, softening a little. "Still . . ."

"Still, we have a Clan to feed—a *huge* Clan. There's no

getting around it, Galestar. We have to swallow our pride. We have to do what's best for StormClan."

Galestar went quiet, blinking thoughtfully. "What if we . . . ," she began, before trailing off. "Or perhaps . . ." But she lapsed into silence again.

At last, she groaned. "You're right, I suppose," she muttered. "I can't think of a better idea, anyway. So who should we visit first—ShadowClan or RiverClan?"

"Both. We should split up. It will be quicker that way, and less threatening. They've never liked seeing us together."

Galestar nodded reluctantly. "No warriors, either," she added. "Nothing that might alarm them. They're already afraid of us. Besides, if the other Clans do turn us away, I'd prefer it if the rest of StormClan didn't see it."

"Agreed."

Stripestar nuzzled Galestar's soft flank. "So," he murmured, "which do you choose? Birchstar or Snakestar?"

The smell of the river was unpleasantly strong as Stripestar picked his way across the squelchy, yielding ground between the reeds. He scented the damp tang of toads not far off, the sharp stink of fish, and the reek of wet soil. The river itself flowed fast, strong and high since the recent rains. As he reached the bank, Stripestar paused, eyeing the murky green water with distaste, the swirls and eddies that rippled alarmingly across its surface, concealing who-knew-what beneath.

Now I understand why Galestar chose to speak with ShadowClan.

"It won't bite, you know," sneered a voice from the far bank. "Though we might."

Stripestar nearly leaped out of his pelt. He hadn't noticed the RiverClan patrol silently watching him from among the reeds. They looked more amused than he would have liked.

"Well, come on, then," mewed the other RiverClan warrior, a cream-pelted she-cat with a dark face and ears. "It's only a short swim."

Stripestar drew himself up, trying to maintain his dignity. "I'll cross on the rocks, if you don't mind. I, er . . . I've come to speak with Birchstar."

"I'm sure she'll be delighted," the other warrior replied. "The leader of the so-called Clan that stole Sunningrocks from us! What an *honor*."

Stripestar felt his fur prickling with anger, but he forced himself to relax. "Will you take me to her?"

The RiverClan cats whispered to each other briefly. Then the she-cat nodded reluctantly. "Follow us."

Stripestar hurried along the bank, slipping and sliding as he tried to keep pace with the sure-pawed RiverClan warriors on the opposite bank. The wet mud clumped and clung to his paws, making him feel heavy and ungainly. When he came to the rocks that rose above the water's surface, he used them to cross, and the RiverClan patrol took up position on either flank, escorting him across a stretch of marshland and into the RiverClan camp.

Stripestar was panting, his legs half-soaked from stumbling endlessly into the water, by the time he reached the leader's den—a neat shelter woven out of reeds.

Birchstar was dozing peacefully in the shade beneath, but at their approach she stirred and stretched. When she saw

Stripestar, she blinked, rose to her forepaws, and cocked her head with surprise. "Can this be real?" she purred. "Is it truly Stripestar, leader of the great, all-conquering StormClan?"

"He wishes to speak with you," announced the she-cat before stepping back to allow Stripestar to approach.

"Alone, too . . . ," Birchstar mused. "How strange. I thought that you and Galestar were joined at the tail. Have you parted ways, then?"

Stripestar's legs trembled, and his stomach roiled with anxiety to be here among the RiverClan cats—and without any of his warriors. But Birchstar seemed more curious than hostile. *So far.* "Galestar and I are still mates," he assured her. "And we still lead StormClan. Together."

"Then I can't imagine why you have come," Birchstar replied, sharply. "StormClan needs no help from any cat, surely. You've already turned your backs on StarClan, so what use could RiverClan be to you?" She narrowed her eyes. "Unless . . . have you come to return our rightful territory to us—Sunningrocks?"

Stripestar swallowed hard. "As it happens, StormClan *does* need the help of RiverClan. The fire that Twolegs set, that swept through the forest . . . it destroyed our camp. It drove all our prey away. We are certain the prey will return. StormClan will recover. But until that happens . . ."

"You want to share our prey? RiverClan's prey?"

Stripestar nodded.

Birchstar dipped her head as though pondering. For a moment, Stripestar's heart lifted with hope. Then the RiverClan leader let out a great snort of laughter. "You have some nerve,

Stripestar! But have you considered that perhaps your warriors are simply . . . bad at hunting?"

Stripestar's blood ran hot. He squared his shoulders, pelt bristling, as he glared at Birchstar. "How dare you—"

"No!" snarled Birchstar. "How dare *you*?"

She stepped up, nose-to-nose with Stripestar, anger blazing in her blue eyes.

A shiver spread through Stripestar. Here, in the middle of the RiverClan camp, he could hardly be more outnumbered. He'd be lucky if he made it out alive. All the same he tensed, ready to fight . . . but a moment later, Birchstar blinked and sank back onto her haunches. Her anger seemed to have drained away, and now she looked only old, tired, and sad.

"Forgive me, Stripestar. I was young once. I know what it is to love, and I wish no ill on you or on the cats who have followed you. But I can only tell you what I told you before, at the Gathering. You and Galestar are making a terrible mistake. I will not indulge your foolishness in forging a new Clan, and I will not go against the wishes of StarClan."

"In other words, you won't help," muttered Stripestar coldly.

"Exactly." Birchstar fixed her gaze on him one last time. "We warned you against taking this path, Stripestar. Now look what has happened! It is for you to face the consequences—you and Galestar. And this time, may StarClan guide your paws."

When Stripestar arrived back at the StormClan camp, he found Galestar waiting for him.

The shadows were lengthening as twilight fell, and their Clanmates were mostly already curled up under their half-built dens, snoring soundly after a hard day's work. But Galestar lay on top of the great boulder at the end of the camp, gazing blankly into the forest. Stripestar could tell at once—*she's had no more luck than I had.*

He leaped up onto the boulder and sat next to his mate. For a long while, neither cat spoke a word. They just remained still, enjoying each other's company and listening to the snores of their Clanmates and the calls of distant birds as darkness crept across the forest.

At last, Galestar shifted, resting her head gently against his flank. "So. Birchstar sent you away empty-pawed." It wasn't a question.

"She thinks we're mouse-brained." Stripestar sighed. "I'm guessing it went just as badly with Snakestar."

Galestar shrugged. "He told me that we must be too busy gazing into each other's eyes to lead the Clan properly." She hissed. "So I told him we were done with him, and ShadowClan, and RiverClan . . . all of them. I told him if they weren't going to help us, we'd leave the forest for good."

Stripestar's ears pricked up. He looked at her, half alarmed and half impressed. "Did you mean it?"

"I don't know. I was angry." *She still is,* thought Stripestar, noticing the glint in his mate's eyes. "*Snakestar* obviously didn't believe me," she went on. "But after I stormed out of their camp, Pinebrush caught up with me."

Stripestar nodded. He'd always admired ShadowClan's

medicine cat. She was wise, and she noticed things that other cats missed.

"Pinebrush was all jittery, worried I really *had* meant it. She tried to tell me that the Clans were stronger together, and that even if we disagree sometimes, we'd be glad of their help if there was a real crisis."

"But this *is* a real crisis!" Stripestar grumbled. "That's the whole point. And here we are, trying to face it on our own, while they refuse to give us any help at all!"

"That's what I thought too," muttered Galestar. "But I didn't say anything to Pinebrush, because . . . well. I've been thinking about it ever since. And even if I didn't mean it at the time, I'm starting to wonder if. . ."

". . . maybe it *is* a good idea," finished Stripestar. "Striking out on our own. Leaving the other Clans."

They both fell silent again, wrapped up in their own thoughts. *Leaving the other Clans . . .* It felt almost too big to consider. Too big to imagine. *Almost.*

Stripestar frowned. "Do you remember when we first met, and we talked about leaving the forest?" he murmured. "I used to dream about it a lot back then."

"The cats we'd meet," Galestar recalled. "Cats red as strawberries. Cats with giant paws."

Stripestar snorted with amusement. "Well . . . how about it?" Excitement was kindling in his belly, a fire that raced through him, made him feel alive once again. "We could really do it. *Together.* We could find a new place—a *better* place. It might be the best thing for us, and for the Clan. A fresh start."

Galestar's tail flicked as she considered. "Where would we go? Not toward the Twolegs. Which leaves the mountains, past Highstones. And who knows what lies beyond them? I mean, I've heard rumors from kittypets, but—"

"We'll find out!" Stripestar laid a paw on hers, his heart racing. *Why didn't we think of this before?* "Listen, things aren't going well for us here in the forest. The cats from my old Clan won't ever be comfortable in WindClan's camp. And this camp is a disaster! Who knows when the prey will return—if it ever will. But if we go . . . if we start a new life, outside the forest . . ."

Stripestar could see a spark of his own excitement reflected in his mate's eyes. Galestar nuzzled him gently. "I believe in you, Stripestar. But we have to be careful. Losing SkyClan was one thing, but this would be a *choice*. We'd be choosing to give up on the Blazing Star prophecy, forever. The other Clans might never forgive us! They'd certainly never take us back if things went wrong. Besides . . . will our Clanmates really want to leave the forest? Think of the elders. Even the warriors—most of them have spent their whole lives here. It won't be easy to persuade them to leave. Some might prefer to desert StormClan altogether and try their luck with the other Clans. Or they might become kittypets, or rogues. Or, worst of all . . ." She broke off, unable to finish the thought.

"They might insist we break apart," Stripestar mewed quietly. "Go back to the way things were. ThunderClan and WindClan once more."

And why not? *It was our kits that made sense of the new Clan. It was the kits that bound us together. And the kits are gone.*

Neither of them could bring themselves to voice it out loud. But Stripestar could feel his mate trembling against him with grief. *I couldn't bear it,* he realized. *If this has all been for nothing.*

"Tomorrow," whispered Galestar. "We'll tell them tomorrow."

And a cold thrill spread through Stripestar at the thought of it.

Later, much later, Stripestar lay next to his mate in the darkness of their den. He listened to the soft whistle of her breath and watched her flank slowly rise and fall. She was a wonder to him, just as she always had been. Though how she could sleep was beyond him.

The dream is alive. . . .

And it was a good decision. He was sure of it. It was the only way to give their Clan a fighting chance. They had already moved mountains to combine two Clans. Why not go further and leave the Clans altogether? Besides . . . when all was said and done, they didn't have a choice.

Did they?

CHAPTER 9

Today is the day, thought Galestar when she woke from an uneasy slumber in the leaders' den. *Today we leave. For good.*

Her head felt fuzzy, as though it were full of bees. She'd hardly slept a wink.

Yesterday morning, she and Stripestar had told the Clan of their plan to leave the forest altogether. Stripestar had wanted to set out right after the meeting, but she had persuaded him to allow the Clan one more night to sleep on it and get used to the idea.

Silently, Galestar listened to the breathing and the snores of StormClan beyond their den. After the astonishment, the shocked murmurs, and the horrified muttering when Stripestar had revealed their plan, Galestar had a feeling that most of them had slept just as badly as she had.

She groaned and rolled over. She was wide awake now, with no hope of dropping off again. *Might as well make the most of it.* Groggily, she crept from the den, leaving Stripestar still deeply asleep.

The day's heat hadn't set in yet, and the air was pleasant and cool. Galestar's spirits lifted a little as she trotted to the dirtplace. The birds were twittering in the trees, the grass

sparkling and wet with dew, and the early morning sun cast long shadows with its golden light. She had almost forgotten her worries by the time she turned back and saw Crowflight waiting for her just outside the camp.

Her littermate looked exhausted, eyes lidded, ears flattened. But as soon as she spotted Galestar, her body tightened, every muscle tensing.

Galestar could tell at once that something was wrong.

"Crowflight?" she mewed, padding closer to give her sister a lick on the ear.

To her surprise, Crowflight flinched away. "I've barely slept," Crowflight muttered. "Tell me, Galestar. Are you serious about this—leaving the forest? I mean . . . how can you be sure it's the right decision?"

Galestar sighed, considering. "I can't," she admitted. "But I am sure of one thing. If we stay here, we'll starve. The prey is gone. Who can say when it might return—or if it *ever* will?"

"But WindClan's camp is—"

"No," Galestar told her firmly. "Even there we can't feed the whole Clan. Besides, the cats from ThunderClan would never agree to it."

"Oh, I'm sure *they* wouldn't." Crowflight rolled her eyes. "Very well. Perhaps you're right about that. But setting out into the unknown? There might be no prey to be found outside the forest. Or there might be dangers worse than starvation. Twolegs, or badgers, or—"

"Of course there might!" Galestar gave a snort of frustration. *How can she not see?* "But what is the alternative? Stay here and wait for death? I am a leader, Crowflight, and I intend

to lead this Clan. We will fight to survive, just as we have always done. And I believe we *will* survive. So long as we stay together, as StormClan, nothing can stand in our path."

Crowflight slumped, her head hanging low. "I was afraid you would say that," she murmured.

The silence between them grew heavy, and Galestar's heart sank. "Are you telling me that you plan to stay behind?" she asked when she could bear it no longer.

Crowflight studied her forepaws. "I'm not . . . good with words like you are, my sister. But I don't want to leave. It feels wrong. *All* of this has felt wrong, from the beginning." Finally she looked up, with defiance in her eyes. "I am WindClan. I have always been WindClan. And my home is on the moor."

Galestar stared at her, stunned into silence. *My own sister. Even she doesn't trust me.* "I can't believe it," she muttered. "We've always been together. Always the same Clan. And now it has to end?"

A stricken look passed across Crowflight's features. "You mean . . . you won't come with me? You still intend to leave?"

"Of course. It's already been decided."

"By Stripestar!" Crowflight exploded.

"By both of us." Galestar's neck fur bristled, anger coursing hotly through her. "I've already told you. It's what's best for the Clan."

Crowflight let out a whimper of distress. "Galestar, I beg you. . . . Don't you remember what our mother said on the day she died?"

"Don't you dare!" snarled Galestar.

"Ripplegrass made us promise," Crowflight went on wildly.

"Promise each other that we would never be separated. That we would always be there for each other, look out for each other, for our whole lives. And now you . . . you're breaking that promise!"

Galestar's claws slid out before she could help herself. She closed her eyes, drawing deep breaths as the image of their dying mother, stretched out and panting weakly in her nest, lingered in her mind. She pushed it away, forcing herself to be calm before she spoke again. "The promise need not be broken. Come with us, Crowflight."

Crowflight lay flat on the grass, burying her head in her forepaws. She looked utterly dejected. "You're not listening," she meowed, her voice muffled. "I'm WindClan, through and through. Just like our mother and our father, and their parents, and their parents' parents." She looked up fiercely. "Have you forgotten? We are the descendants of Windstar herself! The very first leader of WindClan, and its founder. If any cat was meant to stand up for our Clan, to protect it and preserve it, surely it's *you*, Galestar!"

"No cat is prouder of her ancestors than I am," Galestar replied, her voice unsteady. "But pride is no reason to die a slow death by starvation. That is what you are suggesting, Crowflight. I don't want that. And I don't want it for you, either."

Another silence stretched out between them. And Galestar understood, finally, that there was no changing her sister's mind.

"Don't worry about me," Crowflight replied. "I won't be alone."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm not the only cat who isn't going to go along with this."

Galestar tried to hide her surprise. *How many cats are against our plan?* She didn't dare ask. "Very well, then," she mewed instead. "What will you do? Start a new Clan? Throw yourselves on the mercy of RiverClan, or ShadowClan?"

Crowflight hesitated, but not for long. "I don't know. Perhaps I'll become a rogue. But whatever happens, I will dream of the day that WindClan runs on the moors once again. When our camp is full of fresh-kill, and the nursery rings with the cries of newborn kits. That's *my* dream, Galestar. And my greatest wish is that . . ." She trailed off, her lip curling into a snarl as she spotted something beyond Galestar's shoulder.

Turning, Galestar saw Stripestar padding toward them.

"You!" hissed Crowflight. "I hope you're happy with what you've done!"

Stripestar looked calm as he approached, and Galestar felt a rush of relief at having him so close, even in the face of her sister's anger.

"No cat is *happy* about this," he replied evenly. "But I am at peace with our decision, if that's what you mean. Galestar and I have considered it long and hard, and we've given every cat here the opportunity to do likewise. I only hope that you, too, can be at peace with *your* decision. Whatever it may be."

Crowflight scoffed out loud. But Stripestar made no response; he just dipped his head respectfully.

Galestar watched her sister warily. She was afraid that

Crowflight might lash out with her claws, or pounce. If she did, Galestar had no idea what she would do herself. But after a long moment of glaring at Stripestar, Crowflight turned with a furious flick of her tail and slunk back into the camp.

Stripestar sighed as he stepped in close, his warm flank brushing against Galestar's. He shuffled his paws awkwardly, as though he had something he wanted to say and didn't know how to go about it. Galestar waited, patiently, until he had found the words. "Have you changed your mind?" he purred at last.

Galestar hesitated. *No, never,* she wanted to cry. And yet . . . she'd never dreamed of setting out on such a journey without her own sister.

"Listen," Stripestar pressed on. "I believe that the best thing for StormClan is to leave the forest. I really do. But . . . but if you want to stay . . . I'll understand."

His voice wavered, and Galestar was astonished to realize that he was nervous, tripping over his words like a young apprentice. She cast him a glance, but he looked away, embarrassed.

Galestar's heart ached. Then a sharp twinge shot through her chest quite suddenly, making her splutter out a cough. It had been like that quite often, since the fire, her breaths coming hard and painful at times. And all at once it reminded her of why they had made the decision in the first place. *We can't stay here, no matter how much we might want to.*

This place is death.

"What, stay and hunt for prey that doesn't exist?" murmured Galestar. She shook her head.

Stripestar nuzzled her gently, and she could sense his relief, even as he tried to hide it. "Crowflight will come around," she added. "I give it another moon, or two at the most, with no prey and no shelter. I will leave a trail for her to follow—and the others, too. They'll catch up with us."

"Of course they will," Stripestar agreed.

We're lying to ourselves, Galestar thought. *And to each other. Again.*

"This will keep your strength up," Kestrelwing told Galestar, offering her a broad green leaf of sorrel. Galestar grimaced as she chewed. The leaf left a sharp, sour taste on her tongue that seemed to fit her mood perfectly.

Kestrelwing shuffled on to the next cat, while Goldenleaf moved farther down the line, passing out chamomile and burnet.

Surely there should be more of us, thought Galestar, craning her neck to peer at the row of cats preparing for the journey. Her stomach turned over as she thought of Crowflight's words: *I'm not the only cat who isn't going to go along with this.*

She could see eyes glinting in the shadows beneath the dens, watching StormClan—or what remained of it—get ready to leave. She could even hear quiet, mournful mews from the elders' den. And there, in the open, stood Crowflight, making no sound at all. Her gaze was fixed on Galestar. To any other cat she might have looked calm and relaxed. But Galestar had known Crowflight since they were kits, and she could read her sister's grief in the slow twitching of her ears.

As the medicine cats finished passing out the traveling herbs, cats slowly began to emerge from the dens, heads hanging, tails between their legs. Galestar caught Stripestar's sorrowful glance, and she could tell he wasn't looking forward to this any more than she was. It was time to bid farewell to the Clanmates they would never see again.

Galestar swallowed as they filled the clearing, standing face-to-face with those who had chosen to leave. It made her heart ache to see how many good cats StormClan was about to lose. *At least for now,* she told herself. *They'll come after us—I know they will.*

A long, heavy silence hung in the clearing.

Stripestar was the first to step forward, touching foreheads with his own littermate, Grassfoot. Following his lead, other cats padded across, and the camp filled with a gentle mewing as apprentices, warriors, and elders alike shared tongues, nuzzled close to each other, and quietly mourned for the parents, friends, and littermates they would see no more.

Through it all, Galestar watched Crowflight. But neither cat made any move toward the other. *Always so stubborn, when she thinks she's right,* Galestar thought sadly. *Then again . . . so am I.*

A pair of kits came tumbling past, startling her. She recognized them at once—Curlkit and Russetkit, once of ThunderClan. Their mother, Fawnpelt, swooped in, scooping them up with her mouth and setting them down, safely apart from the farewells.

"What's happening?" Galestar heard Curlkit mewling. "Why is Tumbletail leaving?"

"Who's going to look after us now?" Russetkit demanded.

"There will *always* be some cat to look after you," Fawnpelt promised.

The kits looked doubtful, wide-eyed with worry. "Even without a Clan?" asked Curlkit.

"Well, maybe we could join one of the other Clans," replied Fawnpelt brightly.

"You mean ShadowClan? RiverClan?" squealed Russetkit in dismay. "But I don't want to join *either* of them!"

"And what if they won't take us, anyway?" Curlkit wanted to know. "Would that make us rogues?"

Fawnpelt looked around helplessly, as though she didn't know what to say.

Galestar was about to step forward, but Crowflight got there first. "Would that be so bad?" she mewed, padding over to rub noses with the kits. "I've met many a happy rogue in my time."

Curlkit and Russetkit huddled closer to each other, cringing with misery.

"You'll be safe," swore Galestar before she could help herself. "Whatever happens."

But to her horror, the kits only shrank back from her, as though she were a dog. Curlkit even arched her back and hissed. Too late, Galestar realized: *There's nothing we can say to them to make them feel better about this. And there's certainly nothing* I *can say to them.*

"Forgive them," Fawnpelt apologized, hastily bundling the kits away. "They don't mean it."

Galestar only nodded, unable to speak. But she knew they did mean it, and she couldn't blame them. It was her fault that

these innocent kits were in this position. She was responsible for it. No wonder they didn't believe her.

Her eyes felt hot, and she had to sink back onto her haunches. All of a sudden, Curlkit and Russetkit reminded her of own kits—those three cold little bodies laid out on the ground. The kits she had never had a chance to raise. They should have been here now, scampering around her paws. They should have been coming with StormClan on this journey. *Would they have been so scared? Would they have been angry at me too?*

"Galestar." The soft mew of her sister startled her from her thoughts. Crowflight nudged her gently, gave her a rough parting lick. "I wish you well."

In spite of everything. The words were left unspoken. But there was a softness in her littermate's gaze—a lingering sorrow. *As though she could guess what I was thinking.*

Galestar gazed back at Crowflight, her heart aching with gratitude. "And I you, Crowflight," she murmured. "May . . ." She was about to say *StarClan* but thought better of it. "May the stars light your path. I hope we'll meet again."

They stood apart. Crowflight's eyes glimmered with sadness.

And then, at last, it was time to go.

The air was cool in the shady copse as StormClan slipped silently beneath the spindly branches of the pines.

Galestar was weary from three days of walking, not to mention the steep hill they had just climbed. But all the same, her aching body hummed with a strange satisfaction. She enjoyed

the dry crackle of the pine needles underpaw, the stripes of morning sun and shadow across the forest floor, and the occasional twittering of a nest of blackbirds somewhere overhead. It felt so good to be moving.

Her ears pricked at a sudden scuffling across the ground to one side.

"Gotcha!"

Nettlesting, the calico she-cat from ThunderClan, skidded among the pine needles in a pounce. When she turned and came proudly trotting back to the group, she had a limp squirrel dangling from her jaws. Her litter fell on it at once, eagerly ripping apart the fresh-kill.

"I'm bored of squirrel," grumbled Quailkit through an enormous mouthful. "Isn't there any rabbit?" Nettlesting only snorted and cuffed him gently with a paw.

Galestar shook her head, amused. *The hunting has been good, all along the way.* Rabbits on the moor, as they passed WindClan's old camp. Mice and voles among the rocks surrounding Highstones. Now squirrels, as they trod through the fields and woods beyond. *What next?* she wondered. Hopefully not toads, or rats . . . or fish.

She thought of Fawnpelt's kits—the ones they had left behind—and a cloud darkened her good spirits. She hoped that they had full bellies too.

"No time to eat!" Stripestar called, his tail flicking with impatience. He scampered back from the front, hustling Nettlesting and the kits away from the fresh-kill. "Keep going, StormClan!"

Galestar sidled up to him as the mass of StormClan cats moved on once more. "What's the rush?" she asked. "The whole world lies before us."

"Exactly!" Stripestar snorted. "Who can say what wonders lie ahead? We must keep exploring and find a new home for ourselves. Besides," he grumbled, "It's nearly sunhigh, and we're barely out of sight of last night's camp."

Galestar sighed ruefully. She could understand her mate's frustration. Even without the cats they had left behind, StormClan was still big and unwieldy, and it was hard work getting them to do anything together. Cats kept wandering off or lagging behind, and they hadn't been able to find anywhere comfortable to sleep at night for such a large group—especially in the scrubby foothills around Highstones.

Tonight we'll find somewhere better, Galestar told herself. Because Stripestar was right—who knew what lay ahead?

At the thought, she sped up, a spring in her step. Crowflight's doubts had lodged in her own mind at first. But after a few days of walking, things really had begun to seem brighter. Maybe they *could* make a new life for themselves. Maybe they *had* made the right decision after all.

The trees grew sparser and farther apart, and beneath the birdsong, Galestar began to hear something else. It was a low roar, almost too quiet to notice, but getting louder all the time. It sounded like the snoring of a huge, slumbering beast. Her fur tingled with unease.

At last, the sun warmed their faces as they left the copse altogether and stepped out into open countryside. Long grass

tickled their whiskers, and an overgrown field sloped steeply downward. The strange roaring sound filled their ears, and now that Galestar saw what lay at the bottom of the field, she understood.

Thunderpaths!

But not like the single dark scar that ran through the forest territories, wide and straight. This was a whole *tangle* of Thunderpaths, some rising on giant stone trunks, intertwining with each other like a knot of brambles. Monsters tore along the paths—so many of them, all howling as one, the sounds mingling to produce the unending roar she had heard from among the trees.

Galestar gaped in disbelief. *I've never seen anything like it!* All around her, StormClan came stumbling to a halt, stunned into silence by the strange and terrifying sight.

"There—do you see?" Stripestar lifted a paw to point.

"I see the Thunderpaths," murmured Galestar.

"No! I mean, *beyond*." On the other side of the Thunderpaths, Galestar saw another grassy field like the one they were standing in. It sloped up gently toward a patch of woodland, where the land met the sky.

"There'll be more prey there," Stripestar breathed. "I just know it! Maybe even a place we can make a new camp. All we have to do is cross the Thunderpaths."

Galestar shot him an admiring glance. Her mate sat upright, his brown pelt aflame in the light of sunhigh. His amber eyes gleamed with excitement and determination, undaunted by the task ahead. He didn't care about the danger. He only cared about the dream of what lay beyond it.

It fired Galestar's heart, and she turned to address the Clan. "How do we get across?" she asked. "Any ideas?"

The cats of StormClan shifted uneasily, none daring to meet her eye as a chill early leaf-fall breeze ruffled all of their pelts. Even Pebblenose looked uncertain.

"We can't go all at once," offered the big tom Huntheart at last. "There are too many monsters."

"All coming from different directions!" added Thrushcall.

"So then . . . one at a time," mused Galestar, nodding thoughtfully.

"But that would take too long," argued Roughpelt. "What if one of the monsters stops, and Twolegs try to catch us?"

"How do Twolegs cross the Thunderpaths?" wondered Rosebush.

They all fell silent, gazing down the slope. There was a bridge, but a Thunderpath ran across that too, with no space to squeeze by on either side. The other Thunderpaths stretched out in every direction, disappearing across the horizon.

"Perhaps there's another bridge, over that hill?" suggested Whitestep.

"No," Stripestar decided. "Even if there is, it could take until sundown to find it. Or longer—days!"

Tinyclaw looked uncomfortable. "Better that than losing Clanmates, surely," she muttered to Stripestar. "I don't want to see any cat die under the great black paws of a monster."

Stripestar fell silent again, thinking.

Their Clanmates were becoming restless, and an anxious muttering spread among them. Galestar spotted a few cats casting surreptitious glances over their shoulders, as though

wondering whether it was time to head back the way they had come. She felt a stab of panic at the thought. *We've already come so far. . . .* Just when it had seemed as though they were getting somewhere, an obstacle lay in their path that appeared to be completely insurmountable. Looking around, Galestar could tell that many of her Clanmates were having the same thought that she was. *Is StarClan trying to tell us something?* As if they hadn't made their opinion plain enough already.

A harsh cry rang out above. Squinting up at the bright blue sky, Galestar spotted the silhouette of a bird of prey, wheeling high over the copse they had just left behind. It circled once, twice . . . then swooped away across the valley, toward the distant woodland beyond the tangle of the Thunderpaths, until it was no more than a black dot.

It couldn't find any prey, Galestar realized. *But perhaps there, beyond the Thunderpaths, it will have more luck.*

And perhaps we will, too.

There was only one thing she knew for certain—the more they delayed, the more doubtful the Clan would become. She cleared her throat. "We have to keep going," she said firmly. "There will be many troubles on our path—I do not doubt it. But nothing good comes without a struggle. We must fight for our future."

Some of the warriors had begun to sit up straighter, nodding along to her words. Stripestar beamed at her, his eyes shining with love.

"Follow me."

Galestar led the way, prowling through the long grass. The

roar of the monsters rose to a thunder as they approached the edge of the field. A low metal fence separated them from the flat, black ground of the Thunderpath that led away from the great tangle. Each monster gave a deafening shriek as it passed, carrying with it a fierce gust of wind that flattened the cats' fur and made their eyes water.

Up close, beside the metal fence, the disgusting stench of monsters filled Galestar's nostrils, and she wanted nothing more than to shrink away from the Thunderpath. But she couldn't let her own fear spread among the Clan. She forced herself to stay calm, ignoring the pounding of her heart.

Galestar watched, hoping to see some pattern in the monsters' rushing. But it was chaos. They seemed to be coming from every direction at once, each snapping at the heels of the one in front. *It's as if they're chasing each other!* Galestar shuddered at the thought of what might happen if one monster really did catch up with another.

She tried closing her eyes instead, to listen. She could pick out the sudden, crashing roar as each monster swished past—she could even feel it rumbling through her legs and making her whiskers tremble—but beyond that, the din was constant and unrelenting. It was impossible to tell where a monster would come from next.

Galestar felt close to despair. But gradually she began to notice the occasional gap between monsters that was just a little longer—perhaps long enough for one or two cats to run across. There was no telling when those gaps might come . . . but they did come.

"We'll go in pairs." She had to yowl to make herself heard over the din from the Thunderpath. *But at least, if I'm yowling, my voice won't quaver.* "That way we can keep watch in both directions at once. Make sure there is a full-grown warrior in every pair. It will take time! But if we are careful, we will get every cat across. I am sure of it."

She could see doubt and fear on every face. But to her relief, the Clan began splitting up into pairs. Stripestar came close and nuzzled her briefly before he went to Kestrelwing, the old medicine cat.

At long last, the Clan was ready. *Here goes.* Galestar's stomach was tumbling with nerves as she chose the first pair to cross the Thunderpath—Rosebush and Pigeonkit. She had seen the little kit darting after a butterfly in the forest, and she knew he was nimble.

She watched the monsters, waiting for the gap. "Go!" she called.

Rosebush and Pigeonkit bolted as though they'd been stung by wasps. The Clan raised a mighty yowl of encouragement as the warrior and the kit flew across the hard black ground, over the Thunderpath, fast as the wind.

They had almost made it to the grass beyond when Rosebush yelped and stumbled.

No! Galestar's heart lurched with horror. Too late, she saw the loose stones scattered on the Thunderpath. *Rosebush must have trodden on one.* But the warrior kept on limping. He hurled himself into the safety of the grass, disappearing from view as an enormous monster came surging past, braying and blaring in fury.

"Rosebush!" roared StormClan as one. *"Pigeonkit!"*

As the two cats shook their pelts on the far side of the Thunderpath, dazed and astounded to be alive, Galestar turned to the rest of the Clan. She felt dizzy, light-headed with relief and triumph. *It worked. It really worked!*

"Who's next?" she asked.

The sun was dipping, turning golden in the sky, the air growing uncomfortably hot and hazy. But as Galestar gazed across the Thunderpath, her heart sang to see so many cats safe and sound on the other side. It had taken time. But almost the whole Clan had made it across, and apart from Rosebush's injured paw, no cat had been hurt. It had all gone better than she had dared to hope.

Now only four cats remained.

"Your turn," Stripestar mewed, nudging Galestar.

Galestar caught Pebblenose's eyes, and she saw that he was as ready as she was. "Very well," she murmured. "It's time."

Standing side by side with her deputy at the edge of the Thunderpath, Galestar felt a jolt of adrenaline searing through her. Every muscle, every last fiber in her body tensed, ready to launch her across the Thunderpath. She could sense Pebblenose's fear, even though the brave tom was doing his best to hide it. The ground shuddered as a monster shot past. Then another. The gap was coming. *Any . . . moment . . .*

"Now!" yowled Galestar.

The wind streamed in their fur as their paws hammered the ground, driving them onward. The black Thunderpath was hot and hard beneath them. Galestar puffed, forcing

herself to run faster, faster still, not daring to look left or right. She could feel Pebblenose's presence beside her, keeping pace every step of the way.

And before she knew it, they were across, leaping into the grass beyond, to the cheers of their Clan.

Relief flooded Galestar's body like cool water as she sank down gratefully on the soft earth. *We're safe!* she told herself. Then she looked back and her stomach clenched up all over again.

On the far side of the Thunderpath, Stripestar and Kestrelwing were approaching the edge, preparing to make their crossing. But something was wrong. Kestrelwing's head was dipping, and he looked unsteady on his paws. Stripestar had to prop up the old medicine cat, and he was meowing urgently into Kestrelwing's ear.

He's too hot, Galestar realized. All that time waiting in the sun had left the poor elder dazed and disoriented. She thumped her tail with frustration. *Flea-brains! We should have sent him across much sooner.* She and Stripestar had both sworn not to get to safety before the rest of their Clan. But they hadn't considered what that would mean for Kestrelwing.

Tension spread among the Clan as every cat began to realize what was happening. They gathered at the edge of the Thunderpath.

"You can do it, Kestrelwing!" mewled Fernwhisper.

"Don't go until you're ready!" Harewhisker counseled.

"He'll be all right," Pebblenose muttered in a low voice. It was a comfort to have her deputy at her side. But Galestar

couldn't tell if Pebblenose really believed it, or if he was just trying to convince himself.

StormClan fell silent as they watched, rapt with anticipation, and with fear.

Kestrelwing was standing on his own four paws now, swaying slightly. He shook his head, as though trying to clear it, and looked up. Hope surged in Galestar's heart.

With a shriek, a large red monster tore past, rocking the medicine cat back on his heels. At the same time, something fell from a hole in the monster's side, clattering across the black ground of the Thunderpath and coming to rest. A crumpled bit of material, shiny and smooth like the monsters and no bigger than a cat's head. It glinted silver, like a fish jumping in the river on a sunny day.

Trying to ignore her racing heart, Galestar returned her attention to the two cats who remained. A gap was coming. From the arch of Stripestar's back, Galestar could tell that he'd spotted it too.

One last monster roared past. Then Stripestar and Kestrelwing were off, darting across the Thunderpath. The roar of the Clan's encouragement filled Galestar's ears. *Come on,* she willed them. *You can do it.*

Almost at once, Kestrelwing began to stagger. Stripestar slowed to hold him up, and then they were both hobbling together, painfully slow.

StormClan fell silent once again, watching in agony as the two cats unsteadily wove their way across. Galestar couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. She could only stare in horror.

Kestrelwing lifted his head. He shook himself again, throwing Stripestar off and pushing onward with a fresh burst of strength. Galestar's heart lifted as she saw the two cats separate, both speeding up. They were halfway across now. *Nearly safe.* And she began to believe, for the first time, that they were really going to make it.

She shivered as a gust of cold wind stirred the grass, ruffling the cats' pelts. It snatched up the glinting Twoleg object that had come out of the monster and tossed it, clicking and clattering, across the flat ground, right into the path of Kestrelwing.

The old medicine cat lumbered straight into the bit of scrap. His paw came down on it, skidding. He stumbled, his balance gone. Then he dropped like a stone, his flank slamming hard on the ground.

A wail rose up from StormClan.

"Stripestar!" Galestar screeched.

Her mate was still running. He hadn't seen what had happened to Kestrelwing. At Galestar's cry, he faltered, glancing back over his shoulder.

The roar of a monster came rising, filling Galestar's senses. But there was nothing she could do. She could only watch Kestrelwing flounder. He half rose, his rheumy eyes wide with panic. And the gigantic monster came rumbling over him, breaking his body against the hard ground of the Thunderpath.

Stripestar's shriek split the sky.

In its wake, the monster left only a blast of scouring wind

and a ragged bundle of fur and flesh and bone strewn across the ground. The shattered form of what had once been Kestrelwing.

Galestar's heart was pounding so hard she felt her chest might burst. Her terror surged, overwhelming her shock. "Stripestar!" she howled. "Keep going!"

Stripestar crouched on the Thunderpath, dazed, too stunned to know which way to run.

"Here!" Galestar's throat was ragged with her crying. "To us!"

With a jolt, her mate lurched toward the rest of his Clan. Another monster came roaring, spiking Galestar's adrenaline all over again. But Stripestar leaped, pouncing into the grass among his Clan just before the monster thundered past.

He lay there for a long time, his face buried in the earth, his flanks heaving in and out as he panted. Gradually, the pants turned to yowls of anguish. Galestar lay down beside him, saying nothing, hoping only that her warmth and the touch of her fur against his might give him some small comfort.

StormClan huddled around their leaders, heads bowed. They had made it across the Thunderpath—every cat but one. And now, at last, the grief welled up in Galestar, so deep she thought she might drown in it.

I can't believe it, she thought. *The medicine cat who tended to me when I was heavy with my kits. Who delivered them. Who guided our Clan, even when he thought we were doing the wrong thing.*

He's gone.

* * *

Slowly, terribly, a fresh horror dawned on the cats of StormClan.

Even his body is lost.

Galestar knew, deep in her bones, that no cat dared cross the Thunderpath again to retrieve Kestrelwing. Even if they did, she would have forbidden it. They might reach him, but they would never be able to drag him back to safety. Not without losing their own lives too.

StormClan wouldn't even be able to mourn him properly.

They lingered in uncomfortable silence, until at last there was nothing to do but move on.

The Clan went reluctantly at first, one or two at a time. But soon they were all hurrying up the grassy slope, scampering as fast as they could over the hill and down into a wooded valley beyond.

As soon as they had rid their noses of the foul stink of the Thunderpath and their ears of the hideous roar of the monsters, they stopped in a small clearing. They collapsed there, panting. They were too exhausted and heavy with grief to hunt or even build nests.

When twilight stole across the land, they rose as though in silent agreement. It wasn't a vigil—not without a body. But it was the best they could do for their fallen Clanmate. And as night fell they all dropped where they stood, falling asleep one by one in the shadows beneath the boughs.

Galestar rolled over, then rolled again. The earth was hard and uncomfortable. She was too cold, then too hot. She knew she would get no peace tonight.

In her uneasy dreams, she kept seeing the dreadful moment over and over again—the horror on Kestrelwing's face just before the monster came. Even at the vigil, she hadn't been able to scrub that image from her mind. It had haunted her, until she wanted to throw back her head and howl her shame up at the stars. *We failed you, Kestrelwing.*

Even if she'd done that, would StarClan have heard her? Were they looking down on StormClan as they grieved their medicine cat? Somehow Galestar doubted it. StarClan had forsaken them. StarClan didn't care what happened to them. Not anymore.

A shuffle among the leaf-litter made her ears prick up. She blinked and lifted her head.

On the other side of the clearing, a cat was moving stealthily among the slumbering bodies of StormClan. Galestar's heart lurched. *Are we under attack?* She tensed, hackles rising, suddenly wide awake. Then the cat slid into a shaft of moonlight, and Galestar recognized the glowing white pelt of Petalstep, one of the older warriors from WindClan.

Her relief stuck in her craw. At first she thought Petalstep must have been going to make a dirtplace. But if that was all this was, why was she creeping like a shadow?

Petalstep must have heard something because she froze. Her eyes met Galestar's, and she almost leaped out of her skin.

That was when Galestar knew, and her heart sank like a stone.

She's leaving. She's deserting StormClan.

Petalstep dropped her head as if unable to hold her leader's gaze. Slowly she turned and slunk away, her tail drooping

behind her as she disappeared among the shadowy tree trunks.

A flash of anger burned through Galestar like the scorch of a flame. Petalstep had been a warrior under Swiftstar. She and Galestar had shared tongues, had hunted together, had fought side by side, more times than Galestar could count. After all that, Petalstep would just abandon their Clan?

Shaking off her sleepiness, Galestar heaved herself upright and padded across the clearing, taking care not to wake the rest of the Clan. As soon as the sleeping warriors were behind her, she sped up, following until Petalstep had no choice but to stop and turn, beneath the branches of an old beech tree.

The white she-cat shook her head sadly, her pale eyes glimmering with regret. "I'm sorry," she mewed.

"Then come back," Galestar told her hotly. "No cat need know about this. We can pretend it never happened."

"No," Petalstep replied firmly. This time she didn't shy from meeting Galestar's angry glare. "This is all wrong. You saw what happened to Kestrelwing. I can't stop thinking about it. I can't stop . . . *hearing* it."

"You think it's a warning from StarClan?" Galestar demanded. "It was only an accident, Petalstep. A terrible, awful accident . . . but nothing more. The rest of the Clan made it safely, didn't they?"

"It's not just that." Petalstep shuffled her paws, awkwardly. "It's everything. This life that you've chosen for us—you and Stripestar—it's not the life of a real Clan. It's a life for rogues."

"But it's not forever!" Galestar cried. "Don't you see? Once

we find a place to make a camp, the journey will be over. StormClan will thrive. Besides, there is no place for us back in the forest. You know that! Don't you remember how hard it was, after the fire, with no prey to hunt?"

"There was prey on the moor," Petalstep muttered under her breath. "Enough for WindClan, anyway."

Galestar sighed, feeling suddenly weary. They had been over this before so many times. *What's the use in fighting?* "Is that where you plan to go, then?" she asked. "Back to the moor?"

Petalstep shook her head. "WindClan is finished. I understand that. And I have no desire to cross that Thunderpath ever again." A shudder ran through her, from head to tail-tip. "No. I'll find a Twoleg den. Perhaps they'll take me in."

"You mean . . . you'll become a *kittypet?*" Galestar couldn't keep the disgust out of her voice.

"At least kittypets don't starve!" Petalstep snapped back.

"Stay," Galestar begged. "We might find our new camp tomorrow, or—"

"Or the next day. Or the day after that. Or *never.*" Petalstep cocked her head, studying Galestar closely. "Before I leave . . . I want to know the truth. Do you really believe in it?"

"In what?"

"In this dream of Stripestar's."

Galestar blinked, taken aback. "It's my dream too."

"Is it?" Petalstep slowly shook her head. "I don't know, Galestar. Perhaps StormClan is just too big. Too many cats living together . . . and cats from different Clans, too. Could it ever really work?" She looked up again. "So . . . what's your answer?"

Galestar didn't hesitate. "I believe in it. I believe in Stripestar. And I believe in StormClan."

Petalstep's shoulders sank in defeat. "That's what I was afraid of." Coming close, she touched her forehead to Galestar's. "You were a good leader, Galestar. Farewell. And may StarClan light your path."

Galestar stood still for a long time, watching until Petalstep had disappeared like a ghost among the trees. Her sadness was welling up again, making her chest ache and her breaths come hard and short. She'd never have dreamed she would have to part with another Clanmate so soon after Kestrelwing.

How many more will we have to lose before we find our home?

Fiercely, she shook off her sorrow. Petalstep hadn't believed in StormClan, and neither had Kestrelwing. Maybe if she had listened to him, the medicine cat would still be among them. But either way, Kestrelwing wouldn't have died for nothing.

Galestar wouldn't allow it.

Chapter 10

Once, Stripestar had thought that Highstones were the tallest mountains he would ever see. Now he understood that they were barely mountains at all.

No, these *are mountains!*

His heart swelled as he stopped and craned his neck to take in the peaks, so high up that they could hardly be seen. They pierced the fluffy white clouds like jagged claws. The mountaintops were bare gray rock against a blue sky, rugged and forbidding, and the slopes that led up to them looked dizzyingly steep, even from so far away.

Drawing a deep breath, he savored the fresh wind that whipped through the scrubby grass of the foothills. This was what they had dreamed of, he and Galestar, all those moons ago, on the night they had first met. The world beyond the forest . . . *Stars above!* It was even bigger than he had imagined.

Stripestar closed his eyes, enjoying it for as long as he could. For just one moment, he didn't want to look back over his shoulder at the weary cats of StormClan, still struggling up the hillside behind him, pawsore after nearly a moon of travel.

He didn't want to see their drooping whiskers and their gloomy expressions or hear their grumblings of discontent.

Most of all, he didn't want to remember what had happened at the tangle of Thunderpaths.

First Kestrelwing, then Petalstep. At least the WindClan warrior lived, though, and had made her own choice. When Stripestar thought of her, his guts didn't twist with guilt as when he thought of Kestrelwing. His mood didn't darken until he could scarcely see a way forward.

He opened his eyes with a heavy sigh to find Galestar at his side. His mate leaned into the wind, peering up at the mountains, her black-and-white fur rippling like the grass of a meadow. "They look . . . steep," she murmured. "And treacherous."

"But promising," added Stripestar. "There must be valleys between the peaks. Maybe mountain hares to hunt, and crystal-clear streams. Maybe somewhere we can make our camp. This could be it, Galestar! This could be our home."

"If we can reach it. The rock faces are almost sheer in places. And it's so *high*."

Stripestar nodded. Reluctantly, he tried to imagine his tired, dejected Clanmates attempting to scale those slopes and found it harder than he would have liked. "Perhaps you're right," he muttered. "Should we choose a different direction?"

His mate considered for a long while. Then, to his relief, she shook her head. "We've come so far. Let's not be mouse-hearted."

Galestar's words filled Stripestar with strength, and the

two leaders turned to face their Clanmates. They were gathering on the hilltop now, many panting and lying flat, trying to recover, while others were still stumbling up the slopes, not yet arrived.

"We'll rest here a while," Stripestar promised, "before we press on."

"If we keep going," added Galestar, "we can be up in those mountains by sundown."

No cat replied. Stripestar could feel the reluctance in their silence and in their sullen glances.

His gaze fell on Rosebush, who was curled up licking and gnawing at the paw he'd injured on the Thunderpath. Stoneflower had made Rosebush a poultice of broom flowers and wrapped the paw in cobwebs to protect it. But it had swelled up all the same, and Stripestar had noticed the warrior limping only that morning.

His heart squeezed with guilt at the thought of forcing Rosebush to climb a mountain with such an injury, and he padded over, lowering his voice to speak with the warrior. "Is it healed yet?" he asked.

Rosebush dropped his paw and sighed. "If I say no, will it make any difference? I'll go if I have to." But he winced as his paw touched the ground.

Rosebush has clearly been biting his tongue for a while, thought Stripestar ruefully. He'd been against forming the new Clan, but once the decision had been made, Rosebush had done everything he could to support StormClan. But maybe now he had hit his limit.

"Listen," Stripestar meowed softly. "If you're not up to this, we could—"

"No!" Rosebush's growl took Stripestar aback. "I'm sorry," he mewed more softly. "But I won't be the cat who slows the whole Clan down. I'm coming, like it or not."

Stripestar nodded, heart swelling with admiration for the brave tom. "I do like it. And the choice is yours."

As he turned away, Stripestar saw Rosebush's mate, Whitestep, looking doubtful. The she-cat sidled over, nuzzling Rosebush gently. *She thinks this is a bad idea,* Stripestar realized. Perhaps they all did.

But Whitestep didn't object, and neither did any other cat.

The sun was dipping, turning the sky gold, by the time StormClan reached the foot of the closest mountain. Sunbeams slanted across the mountainside, illuminating every boulder and every tough, twisting thornbush that had taken root among the stones and scree.

The rest on the hilltop had given every cat a second wind, and the air was cooling now. Stripestar felt light on his paws as he hopped and darted up the lower slopes, paws sinking here and there among loose pebbles and dry patches of soil.

"Last cat to the top is a furball!" Stripestar called to Galestar. She was well ahead already and gave only a snort in reply. As always, Stripestar couldn't help but be impressed by her agility. She was practically flowing up the mountainside, making elegant leaps and bounds from rock to rock.

The higher they climbed, the steeper the ground became. The chatter among the cats of StormClan slowly died away

until only panting and the scrabble of claws on stone could be heard. Once, Stripestar's hind paw gave way beneath him, skidding away with a spray of pebbles. Another time, a whole clod of soil came apart when he put his weight on it, and he slumped flat on his belly.

From up ahead, Galestar let out a little *mrrow* of laughter. "Come on, furball," she murmured, doubling back to help Stripestar onto all four paws.

Glancing back, Stripestar was relieved to see that the shower of dirt hadn't hit any of the cats climbing below. He caught sight of Rosebush and felt a warm rush of relief to see the warrior clambering close behind the leaders, with no sign of pain. *His paw really must be healing, then.*

It was hard, tiring work. But the foot of the mountain was far below them now, and the summit was getting closer. A breeze wafted the scent of distant prey into Stripestar's nostrils, making his mouth water. *Mountain hares—I knew it!* He began to climb faster.

A little farther up, Stripestar heaved himself onto a flat slab of rock strewn with loose pebbles. He could hardly believe it—a path led from the rock, sloping gently upward and curling around the side of the mountain. His mate sat waiting patiently where the path began.

Thank StarClan! Stripestar thought. Then he snorted. StarClan had nothing to do with this. It was *he* who had led StormClan here—he and Galestar. StarClan had abandoned them. They had thought this was all a terrible idea. *But look at us now!*

Once the rest of the Clan had caught up with their leaders,

they set off again, following the path around the mountainside. They trotted much more quickly now, with no need to scramble across boulders or around thornbushes. Hopeful murmurs and meows of conversation passed among the cats. Stripestar could feel his shoulders relaxing, his muscles loosening, as he walked side by side with his mate.

Then Galestar stopped, her neck fur bristling.

Up ahead, a stretch of the path had fallen away as scree in some long-ago rockfall. The gap was no more than a couple of rabbit leaps, but it was enough to set a chill creeping across Stripestar's pelt.

Carefully padding to the edge, he peered down into a gaping chasm, so deep he couldn't see the bottom.

Stripestar felt dizzy. Fear prickled in his belly. But for the sake of StormClan, he knew he couldn't let it show. So he lifted his head, fixing his gaze on the far edge of the path. Then he bunched his hind legs . . . and leaped.

He flew, the breeze ruffling his fur, and landed neatly in a crouch on the far side.

"Easy!" he called back, hoping his voice didn't betray how hard his heart was pounding. "Just imagine you're pouncing on a tasty squirrel!"

The cats of StormClan looked doubtful. But Galestar stepped up to the edge of the gap and nodded, her brow furrowed with determination. "One at a time, then," she mewed. "Let's do it."

One after another, they leaped across the gap. First Galestar, then the others—warriors, medicine cats, apprentices, and

elders alike. The strongest warriors leaped with a kit dangling from their jaws, safely carrying the youngest across. Stripestar began to relax again as the cats of StormClan gathered on his side of the path. The jump really *wasn't* difficult. And the more of his Clanmates who made it safely, the more that confidence seemed to fill the remaining cats.

But his stomach clenched as he watched Rosebush step up to the gap. The ginger tabby's ears were flattened. His whiskers quivered as he crouched there, peering down into the chasm beneath.

A strange disquiet took hold of Stripestar, and he shifted uneasily on his forepaws. "Take your time, Rosebush," he yowled across the gap.

Whitestep pushed through the crowd of cats who had already made the jump. "We can go together," she called to her mate. She padded to the edge, preparing to leap back across it.

"I'm fine!" snapped Rosebush. "It's barely a fox-length."

Whitestep froze, hesitating, then stepped back. She looked just as uneasy as Stripestar felt. *He doesn't sound fine. He doesn't look fine, either.*

Stripestar's gaze snagged on the poultice around Rosebush's paw. It was darkened with blood. It had come loose. And now his doubts welled up, overwhelming him. "Wait!" he called. "Rosebush, don't—"

Too late. Rosebush crouched back and hurled himself across the gap.

Stripestar knew at once that Rosebush wouldn't make it. The launch was wrong, the tabby's forepaw twisting as though

he'd trodden on a wasp. He let out a hideous keening sound, a wail of pain and panic and horror.

His forepaws thumped down on the edge of the path, his body slamming into the rocks and dangling below. He gasped in agony. Whitestep lunged forward, snatching at the scruff of Rosebush's neck with her jaws. For an instant she seemed to have caught him, but her teeth came free. She gave a blood-curdling shriek.

Stunned with horror, Stripestar watched along with all his Clanmates as Rosebush fought to hold on. His eyes swiveled, wild with terror. He caterwauled one last time.

Then he slid down into the chasm and was gone.

There was nothing that Stripestar could do. Nothing that any cat could do.

"Whitestep, no!" howled Galestar.

Startled out of his shock, Stripestar saw that Rosebush's mate was leaning forward so far it looked as though she might go toppling after him. Nettlesting and Hazelfrond fell on her, and before she could slip and follow Rosebush to her death, they hauled her away from the precipice.

The choice is yours. That was what he had told Rosebush.

Stripestar cringed at the memory. *Fool!* He had wanted so badly to believe that the paw was healed that he hadn't seen the truth: Rosebush should never have climbed the mountain. Stripestar should never have allowed it. And now, because of his foolishness—his *selfishness*—one of the best warriors he had ever known was dead.

He cast a miserable glance around at the cats of StormClan. After Rosebush had fallen, and after the remaining cats had nervously crossed the gap, they had stumbled on until they'd found a section of the path that was wide enough for them all to rest. There, in the shadow of a great, jutting slab of rock, they had lain down, exhausted and stunned with horror. No cat spoke. No cat moved. They were all deep in their own thoughts of the Clanmates they had lost. The only sounds came from Whitestep, who had buried her head in her forepaws, shuddering with grief.

Stripestar felt Galestar's gaze upon him. His mate's blue eyes, glistening with sorrow and full of pain, almost broke his heart. He sat up, determined to say something—*anything*—that might lift the spirits of his Clan.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. He wanted to inspire them. To tell them that hope remained. That their journey wasn't wasted. But here, now, he wasn't even sure if he believed it himself. His heart ached for Rosebush—loyal Rosebush, who had always supported him, had shared freshkill with him when they were apprentices, and had believed in StormClan almost as much as he and Galestar.

"Rosebush . . . is with StarClan now," he mewed weakly. A few heads lifted, turning to stare blankly at him with glazed eyes. "They will take care of him." His voice trembled, and the words felt empty.

"You don't believe that."

Stripestar flinched under the fierce glare of Thrushcall. The dark tabby sprang to his paws, legs set wide, neck fur

bristling. Pebblenose rose too, and to Stripestar's despair, even the gentle gray tom's stare was cold and unforgiving.

"You defied StarClan at the Moonstone," Thrushcall snarled. "Since then, ThunderClan's camp has been destroyed by fire. Galestar lost her litter. We have seen Kestrelwing crushed by a monster, woken up to find Petalstep gone in the night, and watched Rosebush plummet to his death. How many more signs will it take to make you understand? How much clearer can StarClan possibly be? They are *not* looking after us! They will *never* look after us!"

"Perhaps it's time," Pebblenose meowed before Thrushcall could go any further. His voice was calmer than Thrushcall's, but still tight with anger. "Time to give up on this dream. Time to return to the territories where our Clans have lived for generations."

Time to give up on StormClan. Pebblenose didn't say it, but Stripestar heard it loud and clear.

Every cat's eyes were fixed on Stripestar. He quailed, whiskers drooping. He felt like a kit being scolded by his elders. He darted an anxious glance at Galestar and saw her looking just as uncertain as he felt himself.

What if they're right? What if it was all a mistake? Leaving the forest. Crossing the Thunderpath. Climbing the mountain. And where did that leave them now?

The truth was, Stripestar had never known which was the right direction for the Clan. It had always felt like weakness to admit that. But now, it seemed he had no choice.

"Listen, all of you." He hopped onto a boulder beside the

path, sitting up straight to address the whole Clan. "I know you are suffering. And I know . . ." He forced the words out. "I know this journey has not . . . gone well. But I want you to understand that Galestar and I are suffering with you. I will carry the weight of Kestrelwing's death, and Rosebush's too, for all my moons. I will never forget them. And that is why I am so determined to keep going. They haven't died for nothing. They *can't* have!"

He took a deep breath, calming himself.

"Now, I do not know what lies beyond this mountain. But I know what lies behind us—no place that we can call home. That is why I believe we must carry on. I believe there is a home for us. I believe that we must fight for it. But . . ." He dipped his head. "But I know not every cat shares my belief. And you are all a part of StormClan, just as much as me and Galestar. So I will not force any cat to go against their wishes."

Once again he looked to Galestar, his mate. She was watching him with ears pricked, her back arched with anxiety. *She doesn't know what I'm about to say.* If only they could have had a moment to discuss it, to come up with a plan together . . . But there was no time, and nowhere to go.

"Believe with us, until sundown," Stripestar meowed. "That is all I ask. We go on, as one—as StormClan. If we find nowhere to camp, we will spend the night on the mountain. Then, when the sun rises, we will go back down the mountainside." Stripestar humbly bowed his head. "There is my suggestion. But the decision is not mine. It is StormClan's."

He didn't dare look up or meet any cat's gaze. But out of

the corner of his eye he saw them restlessly shuffling their paws, some watching him with distrust. A muttering swelled among the gathered cats. They sounded doubtful.

Stripestar felt a strange, unfamiliar hopelessness tightening his gut. *None of my words have convinced them. They still think we're leading them into ruin.*

Then Galestar cleared her throat. "I hear no objections," she declared, her stern gaze sweeping across the warriors of StormClan, as though challenging them to disagree. "We will honor Rosebush with a vigil tonight. May he find good hunting, swift running, and shelter when he sleeps."

The Clan murmured in agreement.

"And we will *continue* to honor him," Galestar went on, "by finding new territory. By living as a strong Clan, always. His death will not be in vain."

"His death will not be in vain," echoed Pebblenose, and the words came back in a chorus from their Clanmates. Stripestar could see a fresh spark in their eyes now. Some were already clambering to their paws, stretching, making ready to move on.

They are with us. They trust us, still.

He scowled at himself. He should have been pleased. But an ugly feeling was twisting up his belly, like a rat gnawing at a carcass. Because he knew, deep down, that this was nothing to do with him. It was Galestar's doing. *They listen to her.*

Stripestar only wished that they listened to him as closely.

Dusk fell, and the sky turned from red to purple to deepest blue. They followed the path off the mountain and along the

top of a ridge, where a gentle breeze dried the sweat from their pelts. One by one, the stars began to glimmer overhead, and Stripestar couldn't shake the feeling that StarClan was glowering down at them, watching with disapproval.

He was shivering in the evening chill, and grateful for the shelter, by the time they came off the ridge. Here the path wound between two mountains, with sheer rock faces rising on either side.

The mountains seemed different at night—strangely still and forbidding—and it wasn't long before Stripestar's pelt began to prickle again. But this time it was with fear. The solid stone squeezing in on either side made him long for the forest and the open spaces between tree trunks. The narrow track reminded him of the tunnel deep in Highstones, leading down to the cave of the Moonstone. Surely this path led somewhere too. *But where?*

Glancing back over his shoulder, Stripestar could sense the anxiety spreading among the shadowy forms of his Clanmates. "We'll stop soon," he promised. "Just as soon as we can find a place to stay safely until sunup."

He hoped he didn't sound as doubtful as he felt—because the farther they traveled, the less promising the mountains seemed. *Except*... Stripestar's hackles rose as he caught a scent, very faint but unmistakable. *Cats.* And not cats he recognized, either. At his side, Galestar stiffened. She must have smelled it too.

"No scent markers," she murmured. "So we can't be trespassing on any cat's territory."

"Any *Clan* cat's," added Stripestar in a low voice. He

remembered the jokes he had made with Galestar, so many seasons back, about the strange cats they might encounter beyond the forest. *Cats as red as strawberries in greenleaf. Cats with giant paws.* Somehow, none of it seemed quite so funny on this darkening mountainside.

"Halt, strangers!"

The angry hiss stopped Stripestar dead in his tracks. It echoed from the rocks and sent a chill down his spine. He craned his neck, trying to understand where the voice had come from.

"Who are you?" he yowled in reply.

"Who are *you*?" growled another voice in response.

Suddenly, there were voices everywhere, coming from all sides.

"What brings you here?"

"Tread no farther!"

"This is Tribe territory!"

"StormClan, to us!" roared Galestar. Stripestar's heart hammered as he hustled his Clanmates, along with Galestar, rallying them together into a huddle that blocked the narrow path, with the elders and the kits in the center, and the warriors circling them. They all stood trembling, tense and alert, eyes darting across the rock faces on either side.

Stripestar unsheathed his claws, ready to fight. He could see them now, the unknown cats, perched all around. To his alarm, he saw that they were watching from *above*, their eyes glinting fiercely in the dark, their forms shadowy, almost invisible as they peered down from hidden caves and crevices in

the rock face. Stripestar felt a rush of relief to see that StormClan wasn't outnumbered—followed by a surge of worry that there might be other mountain cats, any number of them, still hidden and waiting to pounce.

Reluctantly, he pulled in his claws. "We can't fight them," he muttered to Galestar.

Galestar nodded. "At least for now."

Peering up at the attackers, Stripestar was able to make out the shape of the closest mountain cat—the one who had spoken first. A brown tabby tom with hostile green eyes, perched high up on a boulder; he was lean and wiry, with oddly spiky fur.

"We mean no harm," Stripestar called, trying to sound as friendly as he could. "I'm Stripestar, and this is Galestar. We are the leaders of StormClan. We come from another territory, far away—the forest. Perhaps you have heard of it?"

The mountain cat made no reply, but cocked his head. *What is that supposed to mean?* Stripestar got the strange feeling that the stranger understood, in some way—that he *had* heard of the forest. But apparently, he wasn't willing to admit it.

Stripestar pushed on, hopefully. "Are there Clans up here too? We are looking for a new territory. Not *your* territory," he added hastily, as he sensed Galestar tensing up. "We aren't looking for a fight. Only a place to live. A place to feed and shelter our Clanmates."

"There's no place for you here!" shrieked another mountain cat suddenly. She hopped down from a higher ledge, balancing impossibly on a narrow rocky spur. She seemed just as scrawny

and feral as the green-eyed cat, but with fur that looked yellow in the starlight. "The mountains are *ours*, stranger!" she spat, flattening her ears. "They belong to the Tribe of Rushing Water!"

"A moment, Lightning," interrupted the green-eyed cat. He jumped across to her side and began muttering in a low voice.

Stripestar strained his ears, trying to catch what they were saying. "Stoneteller spoke of visitors," he heard. "Perhaps we should let her judge?"

The yellow she-cat scoffed. But after a moment's thought, she gave a reluctant nod.

Stripestar's heart lifted as the green-eyed tabby descended to the path in front of StormClan. The way he moved across the rocks was a wonder—so fast and smooth, like a stream bubbling downhill.

"I am Gust Whistles Through the Mountain," the tom introduced himself. He lowered his head and raised one paw in a peculiar gesture of welcome. His voice was strange and guttural, like those of the other mountain cats. Up close he looked tightly muscled, despite his narrow frame, and his fur was stiff and matted. His scent was strong, but not unpleasant. It reminded Stripestar of the mingled smell of herbs in a medicine cat's den. "She is Lightning Scratches the Sky," Gust continued. "But you may call us Gust and Lightning."

At the tom's words, Stripestar felt a prickle creep across his pelt. He turned to look at Galestar, and her eyes were wide with amazement, just as his were.

"Gust . . . like the wind," murmured Galestar. *WindClan.*

"And lightning, always followed by thunder," added Stripestar. *ThunderClan.*

Gust scowled, confused. "I do not understand," he growled.

"It's nothing," Stripestar reassured him. "We are truly glad to meet you, Gust and Lightning. Gladder than you can imagine."

Hope had sparked once again in Stripestar's heart, filling him with fresh energy. Thrushcall had been so certain that StarClan had been sending them signs with the deaths of the kits, of Kestrelwing and Rosebush. But perhaps *this* was the sign. A sign that StormClan was heading in the right direction after all . . . and a promise for the future. Stripestar wanted to leap with joy. *I knew it!*

"So then," mewed Gust cautiously, "you will follow us. Agreed?"

Stripestar and Galestar both nodded, as one. "Agreed."

In the cold light of the moon, Gust and Lightning led StormClan through a landscape of silver and shadow. The two mountain cats loped ahead, moving without hesitation over and around the rocks and crevices and shrubs, while the clumsy Clan cats stumbled behind, stubbing their paws and cursing the harsh wilderness of the mountains.

It was almost moonhigh by the time their leaders stopped and brought them all shambling to a halt, every cat weary and pawsore, beneath a jutting overhang of rock. The shadows twisted and turned beneath it.

Glancing up, Stripestar gasped to see a gnarly ancient tree growing out from the mountainside just above their heads. Its tough old roots pierced the very rock itself, like the gigantic talons of an eagle. Its crooked branches blotted out the stars, each blacker than the night, and creaking in the breeze.

"This is the tree-rock," Gust explained simply when he saw Stripestar staring. "Your Storm Tribe will be safe here. They must wait."

"Storm*Clan*," Galestar corrected him. "And what do you mean, wait?"

Lightning snorted. "Surely you know, only leaders can commune at the Cave of Pointed Stones."

Gust's shoulders shook, as though he was amused at the very thought of the rest of StormClan joining them, while Stripestar and Galestar exchanged a puzzled glance. *We don't even know what that is!* But they had come so far. And Stripestar felt certain that if these cats deserted them, they would never find their way back off the mountain.

"Very well," Stripestar told them. "We do not wish to intrude on your home. Our Clan will wait here. Galestar and I will go with you, as your guests."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Tinyclaw's worried gaze and Pebblenose shuffling his paws. Neither one of them looked willing to let their leaders go on alone. *But that's too bad.*

Lightning muttered something into Gust's ear, and Gust nodded, frowning. "Explain," he demanded. "Who is leader here? The tom or the she-cat?"

"We are both leaders," Galestar told him. "You must take us both—or neither."

The mountain cats looked at each other, shaking their heads in wonder.

"Two leaders . . . ," Gust murmured. "By the Tribe of Endless Hunting, how strange! Then come with us. We will go now to the Cave of Pointed Stones."

"What is this cave, exactly?" asked Stripestar, trying not to let his fear show.

"It is the place of the Stoneteller."

"Are you really going to go with them?" It was Tinyclaw who spoke in a low mutter. Stripestar turned to see that the big ginger-and-white she-cat had crept close to him, swishing her tail anxiously. "Besides, who is this *Stoneteller* they speak of? It could be a trap."

"Galestar and I will take that risk," replied Stripestar. He spoke up loudly so that the whole Clan could hear him. "For the good of StormClan."

And, at least this time, we won't be putting any other cats in danger.

His Clanmates still looked nervous. But it couldn't be helped. Stripestar felt almost relieved at the thought of being apart from them and their grumbling, at least for a little while.

"Lead on," Galestar told the mountain cats.

They left StormClan to settle down uneasily in the shadow of the great tree. Then Stripestar and Galestar followed Gust and Lighting, who took off again, scrambling across the rocks. The pair seemed to know the mountain like it was an old friend. *They must have been living here for a long time.* The thought lifted Stripestar's spirits as he tried to keep up with their guides. *There must be plenty of prey. So perhaps there is a place for us here, too. . . .*

They took narrow, winding paths among the rocks—trails that Stripestar could hardly see, only feel beneath his paws. Soon they were out of sight of the tree-rock, clambering down toward the other side of the mountain.

A sound had begun to fill their ears. A distant roar that reminded Stripestar of the awful din of the Thunderpath. It became louder, then louder still, until they emerged from behind a towering crag and Stripestar saw that it was no Thunderpath at all.

By all the stars!

He stopped in his tracks, staring in astonishment.

"It's . . . beautiful!" murmured Galestar, just as stunned as her mate.

Water gushed wildly down from high above, splashing and foaming into a dark pool a few fox-lengths from where they stood. Stripestar couldn't help it—he let out a *mrrow* of delighted laughter. The water shimmered in the moonlight, almost as though it were alive. The roar they'd heard was the churn and thunder as it hit the pool.

Stripestar shot Galestar a look, and his heart warmed to see her blue eyes sparkling with enchantment as she gazed upon the sight.

Lightning snorted with amusement. "I suppose you've never seen a waterfall before?"

"We have," Galestar replied. "But this one is special."

"This way," meowed Gust briskly.

The mountain cats skirted the pool and slunk onto a narrow ledge of rock that disappeared behind the great mass of

falling water. *The waterfall,* Stripestar thought in wonder. He and Galestar followed, dazed with awe.

The rock beneath their paws was smooth, wet, and slippery, and Stripestar trod carefully, anxious not to fall. The ledge opened out beneath a rocky archway, and they stepped into a great cavern, the entrance of which had been perfectly concealed by the waterfall.

Once again, Stripestar found his breath catching in his throat. The moonlight shone through the falling water, casting shifting patterns of silver light across the damp, dark rock of the cavern floor. Here and there, small pools of still water glimmered, each one reflecting light like a little slice of the moon itself. The cavern was much bigger than the chambers beneath Highstones, so vast that the roof was lost in shadow.

"Is this your *home*?" asked Galestar in disbelief. Her voice echoed, audible even above the roar of the waterfall behind them.

Gust nodded. "This is the outer cavern. Now we will pass into the Cave of Pointed Stones."

The four cats padded deeper into the cavern, weaving in between the moonlit pools and passing nests of moss laid out like dens. A few eyes gleamed at them from the shadows, watching suspiciously.

At the rear of the cavern, Stripestar made out two narrow passageways leading off into darkness. Here, the endless boiling of the waterfall was quieter, and they could make out occasional drips of water coming from somewhere underground that echoed eerily in the huge space.

Gust led the way, ducking into one of the passages. A short, winding tunnel soon opened out into another cave, much smaller than the one they had left. Here the air smelled fresh and clean, and when Stripestar glanced up, he had to blink at the bright moonlight that shone down through a crevice high overhead.

"There," Gust announced, nodding his head toward the rear of the cavern. "The Teller of the Pointed Stones."

Lowering his gaze, Stripestar saw to his amazement that the cavern was half filled with myriad pools of still water, each one gleaming silver with moonlight. In each he could see the reflection of a forest of long spikes of rock, which seemed almost to drip from the roof of the cave. More of the strange spikes rose from the ground, jutting up like slender fangs among the pools. *The pointed stones,* he realized. He had never seen anything like it. He had never *dreamed* anything like it.

His eye caught a movement, and he noticed a she-cat perching on a large boulder at the rear of the cave, just behind the largest stretch of water. The cat yawned and stretched. She was small and slight, and looked quite ordinary—except for her pelt, which was as silvery white as the moon itself.

"And here you are, at last," the silver she-cat purred. Her voice was calm and gentle, but it echoed around the cave, sounding as though she were up close, whispering in their ears. "Thank you for the introduction, Gust Whistles Through the Mountain. But our guests may call me Stoneteller. It's less of a mouthful, don't you think?"

"I'm Galestar," Stripestar's mate replied, dipping her head respectfully.

"And I'm Stripestar. Are you the . . . leader of these cats?"

Stoneteller purred softly. "Not exactly. The Tribe of Rushing Water is different from the Clans."

Stripestar nodded, unsure how to reply. He was reeling with confusion. *These mountain cats really are nothing like us.*

"We come from the forest," Galestar told the Stoneteller. "We've had to leave our territory behind, and we seek a new place to settle. Somewhere to make our camp. We are StormClan."

"Indeed." Stoneteller's eyes seemed to twinkle like twin stars. "I have been expecting you, Galestar and Stripestar. I saw it in a vision. It seems the path of the Tribe is intertwined with the path of the Clans, like a woven vine. Now we cross once more."

"I don't understand." Stripestar frowned. "You know of the forest and the Clans. . . . But we've never heard of the Tribe of Rushing Water."

Stoneteller shrugged lightly. "I cannot speak for you Clan cats. But in the mountains, we value the tales of our ancestors. We cherish them and pass them down from generation to generation."

"So do we!" snapped Stripestar, feeling a hot flush of irritation spread through his pelt. "Of course we do. Clan cats honor our ancestors. We always have, and we always will."

"Stripestar . . . ," Galestar purred in warning.

But Stoneteller only cocked her head in curiosity. "Is it so?

You must know, then, that the first Clan cats came from the mountains. Indeed, they came from our Tribe."

"No!" Stripestar spluttered with outrage. "That's—"

"She's right," Galestar interrupted. He stared at her, speechless. "Don't you remember?" Her eyes sparkled, as though she was only now remembering it herself. "The elders must have told you tales when you were a kit. How the first cats traveled down from the mountains to form the Clans. I'd almost forgotten . . . and I would never have dreamed they were *these* mountains! Is it really true?" she asked Stoneteller.

The silver cat inclined her head.

Stripestar opened his mouth, then shut it again. As the anger seeped away, the memories began to come back to him. Curled up in the nursery on a rainy leaf-fall night, listening to old Owlflight spinning her yarns about Gray Wing, Clear Sky, and all the rest, leaving their mountain home to seek out new territories. . . .

Could it really be true? It made his head whirl to think of it. They had come here seeking StormClan's future, and instead they had discovered its distant past.

"Stars above . . . ," he murmured.

Stoneteller purred with laughter. "Well, then again . . . perhaps they are only stories, after all. So many generations have passed since those days. What living cat can say what is or is not real?"

"I believed in those tales when I was a kit," Stripestar mewed thoughtfully. "But the more I grew, the more I began to doubt them."

"Many of the Tribe share your doubts," Stoneteller replied.

Stripestar regarded the silver she-cat once again. She spoke strangely, like the other mountain cats, and he still wasn't sure if he trusted her completely. But there was a warmth about her. A kindness and a gentleness that reminded him of some cat . . . Who was it?

Kestrelwing.

The realization took him by surprise and brought a lump to his throat. He swallowed it down, trying to ignore the sudden, painful pang of loss. "You spoke of a vision," he meowed instead. "What do you mean?"

A cloud seemed to pass across Stoneteller's features. She fell silent for a while, gazing down into the wide, deep pool that lay in front of her boulder.

"I listen, always, for the voices of our ancestors," she murmured, almost to herself. "The Tribe of Endless Hunting speaks in many tongues. In the song of the waterfall. In the crumbling of the rocks. Most of all, in the shimmer of the moonlight on the water." Her voice rose and fell, as though she were half dreaming. "They warn of a fierce wind blowing through the mountains. Thunder and lightning crackle and split the sky."

She glanced up suddenly, fixing her gaze on Stripestar and Galestar. Her eyes were shining and pale, like twin moons, and Stripestar could not look away. "And here you are. *StormClan.*"

Stripestar swallowed. There was something almost frightening in the intense stare of Stoneteller. But at the same time,

a new spark of hope kindled in his belly in response to her words. Whatever she was—medicine cat, leader, or something else entirely—this Stoneteller could clearly see something of the future. Which could only mean one thing . . .

StormClan really is on the right path!

"And what else does this Tribe of Endless Hunting tell you?" asked Galestar.

"You have faced many dangers along the way," Stoneteller whispered, so softly that Stripestar had to lean forward to catch her words. "I have seen two brave cats fall already. One long in seasons. One all too young."

Stripestar and Galestar exchanged a quick glance. *Kestrelwing. Rosebush.*

With every word the silver cat spoke, Stripestar's pelt prickled more with excitement. There was no way that Stoneteller could have known any of this—not unless she really was receiving messages from her ancestors.

He turned eagerly back to Galestar. But to his surprise, he saw that she was trembling with anger. "What's the matter?" he mewed, brushing his head against his mate's.

"StarClan must have *known*," she spat. "They must have known what would happen to Kestrelwing, who never went against StarClan in all his days! They must have known what would happen to our kits!"

"And they stayed silent," finished Stripestar. "They took back our nine lives and their guidance, but they didn't warn us of the horrors we would face." He felt Galestar's fury now, burning him up along with her. "Of *course* they didn't! Thrushcall was right after all. . . . They care nothing for us."

"You speak of warnings. . . ." Stoneteller's voice echoed in the cave, drawing their attention back to the silver cat. "I give you one now. I have seen it in the moon-touched water—the place where the land falls away. Here begins the lake without end. It is a place of dangers. Do not end your journey there."

"A 'lake without end.' What do you mean?" Stripestar demanded.

But Stoneteller seemed not to hear him. She was lost, as though in a trance. Shadows had gathered in the cave, but her eyes still gleamed bright silver in the gloom. "Watch for the fish with legs," she murmured. "It will show you the way. Heed its warning."

Then she blinked, and the cave seemed suddenly brighter once again. Stoneteller shook herself, as though waking from a deep sleep.

"Do you . . . understand any of that?" asked Galestar politely.

Stoneteller looked at her blankly, then let out an amused snort. "The Tribe of Endless Hunting often speaks in riddles," she admitted. "Nothing they show me is as a plain as that which a cat can see with her own two eyes."

Stripestar nodded, feeling none the wiser. *This Tribe of Endless Hunting sounds a lot like StarClan,* he thought grimly. *Always so mysterious!* But perhaps Stoneflower or Goldenleaf would be able to make sense of it all.

"I suppose we'll know them when we see them," Galestar meowed, doubtfully. "The 'fish with legs' and the 'place where the land falls away.'" She slumped down, looking dejected. "I don't know, Stripestar. So many signs of what not to do. But what *are* we supposed to do?"

"Keep going." Stripestar spoke at once, with no hesitation. As cryptic as they were, Stoneteller's words had fired him up all over again. "Don't you see? StarClan might not want us to succeed . . . but what about this Tribe of Endless Hunting? They seem to want to help StormClan. Maybe they will give us guidance, even if StarClan has abandoned us. We're not alone, Galestar. We will endure. *StormClan* will endure. I am sure of it."

"Oh yes," murmured Stoneteller. "One thing I can tell you clearly: You will leave a great legacy, Stripestar and Galestar. Your actions will echo through the ages. But this legacy will not be easily won." The silver cat fixed them with her steely gaze one last time. "There is a darkness in your future, Clan cats. A storm is coming."

Chapter 11

The waterfall was no less stunning in the light of a leaf-fall morning. If anything, the tumbling stream of water and the crashing spray looked even more beautiful. The droplets glittered in the sunshine, foaming and rising in a mist toward the clear blue sky.

Perched on a boulder to one side, Galestar gazed in wonder at the shimmering rainbow that seemed to hover in midair above the pool. The roar of the water filled her ears, blotting everything else out. *If we lived here, I'd never tire of staring into the haze of the water, lost in my own thoughts. . . .*

But by sundown they would be gone from this place.

Galestar heaved a contented sigh. Her belly was full for the first time in half a moon, thanks to the feast of fresh-kill the Tribe had brought them at daybreak. *Such generosity . . .* It put ShadowClan and RiverClan to shame. She purred at the memory of Gust appearing at the tree-rock, along with several of the burly cats known as cave-guards, all laden with prey. Mountain hares, rabbits . . . even a pair of eagles! They had tasted so strange, yet so delicious, and still warm from the kill.

StormClan had gratefully fallen upon the offerings,

devouring all of it until nothing was left but feathers and bones. *The prey did not belong to me, nor any cat,* Gust had insisted when Galestar had tried to thank him. *Only to the mountains.*

Galestar frowned as a dark cloud passed across her thoughts. She might have expected her Clanmates' spirits to have lifted after such a meal. But still, afterward, she had heard the mutterings and grumblings that only seemed to have grown louder and more frequent since they had reached this territory.

That was why she had slunk away. It felt good to be apart from them for a little while. To cool her head and calm her mind.

After they had returned from the Cave of Pointed Stones, she and Stripestar had gathered the Clan and reported everything that Stoneteller had told them. Stripestar had been so certain that the words would give every cat hope. But instead their Clanmates had argued over what the messages from the Tribe of Endless Hunting really meant. Some had grown anxious at the mention of a storm, taking it as a bad omen. Others protested that the storm simply referred to their own Clan.

Which was the truth? Galestar had no idea. Not even the medicine cats seemed sure.

"Galestar?"

She flinched, startled from her thoughts. Dragging her gaze away from the shimmering water, Galestar saw Pebblenose and Thrushcall approaching, padding carefully around the edge of the pool toward her.

Something's wrong, she thought, her neck fur bristling as she took in the stiff movement of Thrushcall's shoulders and the way Pebblenose hung his head, as though he was ashamed to meet her gaze.

"What's the matter?" she asked, not quite managing to keep the sharpness from her voice.

Pebblenose did look at her then, and there was a deep sadness in those familiar yellow eyes. After all this time, it still struck Galestar as strange that they had ever been mates. But Pebblenose remained more dear to her than she could put into words. Second only to Stripestar.

Her heart was growing heavy. She knew, deep down, what he was about to say.

"I . . . I have always supported you," Pebblenose stammered. "You know that, Galestar."

She dipped her head in agreement.

"But this has gone too far. This . . . *quest* of yours, and Stripestar's. This dream you're chasing . . . it can never be more than that!" Now that he had begun, the words seemed to be pouring out of Pebblenose, like the waterfall behind him. Thrushcall stood close, saying nothing, in silent support of his mate. "It's changing you, Galestar. Once, you would have seen it yourself. But love has veiled the truth from your sight."

Galestar listened, trying to show no sign that her heart was breaking.

"Three Clanmates lost," Pebblenose continued. "And faith is failing in every cat but you, our leaders." He shook his

head. "I will always love you, Galestar. But. . . . I can no longer trust you."

For a long while, there was only the roar of the waterfall between them. Galestar fought to find the words, but nothing came. Nothing that was right.

"Are you going back to the forest?" she asked finally.

Pebblenose and Thrushcall shared a quick glance. "Actually, we . . ." Pebblenose swallowed, and Galestar wondered, with alarm, what it was that could be even harder to speak out loud than what he had just told her. "We want to stay. Here. With the Tribe of Rushing Water."

Galestar gaped at him. "You're not serious!"

Thrushcall cleared his throat, looking awkward. "We can go no farther, Galestar. And it's not so bad here. There's plenty of prey. And the rocks and the scrub, and the way the wind whistles across the mountainside . . . it reminds us of the moor."

"So this is your home now." Galestar couldn't keep the anger from her voice anymore. "Did it take so little to make you betray your Clan? A couple of plump hares and a big rock to sleep under. Are you so easily swayed?"

Pebblenose had always known what to say to her. Now he said nothing. He didn't even look upset anymore—only weary. Galestar guessed that he must be simply waiting for her fury to pass. *As if it's of no more importance than a brief downpour in newleaf.*

Galestar clamped her jaw shut. They didn't deserve her scorn. They deserved nothing from her. Gradually, she

allowed the hot rage to leak out of her until she felt utterly empty. She sagged, exhausted.

"Go, then. If they will have you. Either way, you are StormClan cats no longer."

Thrushcall hesitated, one paw raised as though he wanted to say more. But his mate simply turned on the spot and padded away. "Farewell, Galestar," murmured Pebblenose without even a glance over his shoulder. And, after a moment more, Thrushcall scampered after him.

Out of the corner of her eye, Galestar watched the pair circle the pool and disappear behind the waterfall. *Gone to beg Stoneteller for a place in the Tribe, no doubt.*

She tried to summon her anger again, but it wouldn't come. This time she felt only the deep, aching pain of grief. When Petalstep had left, it had hurt. But Pebblenose and Thrushcall had been her best friends, ever since they were kits rolling around and play fighting on the mossy floor of the WindClan nursery.

This betrayal was so much worse—like claws gouging at her heart.

Who else would they lose before StormClan could find a place to call its own? And how was she to endure it?

How could she bear to lose any more Clanmates?

Galestar caught the bracken scent of Stripestar before she saw him, sauntering toward the waterfall from the direction of the tree-rock. There was a lightness to his paw steps and a sparkle in his eyes that made her neck fur bristle. She sat up, startled by her own reaction.

He doesn't know, she reminded herself. Still, this morning Stripestar's starry-eyed cheerfulness left a taste like crow-food in her mouth. Sometimes it felt as though this journey were only a game to him. A kit's adventure, with nothing real at stake. *Even after Kestrelwing. Even after Rosebush.*

"By all the stars, what a difference a full belly makes!" Stripestar exclaimed, hopping up to join Galestar on her boulder. "I feel like a new cat." He lay down, giving Galestar a gentle nuzzle. Irritated, she ducked away from him.

"What's wrong?" asked Stripestar, his eyes widening with concern.

"Weren't you listening when we told them of Stone-teller's prophecy?" huffed Galestar. "Our Clanmates are afraid. They're doubtful. They don't exactly share your enthusiasm."

"Yes, but—"

"Pebblenose is staying here," Galestar interrupted before Stripestar could say anything else that might get under her fur. "And Thrushcall. They've had enough. They've abandoned the Clan."

Stripestar's face fell. His whiskers drooped. And at once, Galestar's heart spiked with guilt. She'd wanted to stop him from being so . . . *happy.* Now that she'd managed it, she found that it wasn't what she wanted at all.

"It . . . hurts," she confessed, dredging the words up with difficulty. "You know what Pebblenose means to me. And it's got me thinking . . . What if he's right?"

"I don't understand."

Galestar sighed. "Pebblenose is a wise tom. As my deputy, he always gave me good advice. I never set a paw wrong while I followed it. So if he believes that this dream of ours is folly, perhaps . . . perhaps it *is*."

"Folly?" breathed Stripestar. "You don't really believe that . . . do you?"

Galestar made no reply.

For a little while, they lay side by side, staring into the shimmering plunge of the waterfall, each wrapped up in their own thoughts.

"I'm sorry about Pebblenose," Stripestar mewed at last. "I do know how special he is to you. But he isn't . . . as *strong* as we are. He never really believed in StormClan, even at the beginning. Things have gone wrong; I won't deny it. But we never thought this would be easy, and we can't let one cat turn us away from the path we have chosen."

Path? thought Galestar bitterly. *What path is that? We don't even know where we're going from here!* But she held her tongue.

"Don't you remember why we set off in the first place?" Stripestar shuddered at the memory. "There was no prey for us in the forest. No camp for us to live in. ShadowClan and RiverClan offered us nothing. We were desperate, Galestar! I don't want to be desperate. Never again."

Almost without realizing it, Galestar found that she was nodding in agreement. She didn't want that either. And the thought of turning back . . . of returning to the forest . . . it made her tail curl with horror.

But still.

"What about Stoneteller's prophecy?" she muttered. "The darkness in our future. The storm. That doesn't sound good, does it?"

"You're forgetting the *legacy*."

Stripestar's amber eyes were shining again. And again Galestar found herself drawn to him, like a flower stretching its petals up to the warm sunshine. There was nothing that could bring Stripestar down—not for long. She had always admired that about him. He could find hope, even in the darkness.

"We can weather any storm," Stripestar promised her. "And a legacy . . . surely that means kits. How else could our actions 'echo through the ages'? Those were Stoneteller's words. If you ask me, that's a future that we should walk toward. Run toward! No matter what stands in our way."

Galestar's heart had quickened at the mention of kits. When she'd been heavy with her litter, they were all she had wanted. She would have done anything to bring them safely into the world, to protect them, to make a future for them. *And look how that ended.*

Still, she felt that longing stir again, deep inside her. *A family.* Perhaps it did lie in their future. Perhaps that would make it all worthwhile.

"Besides," murmured Stripestar, "if we believe in our dream . . . together . . . who cares what any other cat may say?" He huddled close to her, his warm flank brushing against hers, his familiar scent filling her nostrils and calming her racing thoughts.

This time, Galestar didn't pull away.

* * *

The great cavern echoed with the murmur of cats as StormClan made ready to leave.

Galestar's heart swelled to see how the sunlight glancing through the waterfall cast shimmering blue-green patterns across the pelts of so many brave cats. *Our Clan—StormClan.* She was proud of them. They had made it this far, and she wasn't going to let them down now.

The Tribe of Rushing Water perched all around on ledges, rocks, and boulders, their eyes gleaming with curiosity as they watched Galestar and Stripestar gather every cat together, and as Goldenleaf and Stoneflower offered traveling herbs around.

On the highest boulder, toward the back of the cavern, sat Stoneteller. The silver she-cat stayed perfectly still amid the bustle, as though she were part of the stone itself. On the rocks below her lay Pebblenose and Thrushcall, not daring to glance up at their former Clanmates.

They were mountain cats now. Tribe cats.

Will they take new names? Galestar wondered, with a pang of regret. She'd been so angry with them. But she'd seen enough dirty looks aimed at the pair by her Clanmates that she was starting to feel sorry for them. And how could she blame them for following their hearts?

After all, isn't that what I've been doing, all along?

Even now, she could hear low grumblings of anger among the Clan, mostly directed at Pebblenose. He'd been deputy of WindClan, after all, and now he'd chosen to abandon them.

And yes—some small part of Galestar still hoped that he and his mate might spring up suddenly and come running back. But she knew in her bones that it would never happen, and she had accepted it. What choice did she have? Their minds were made up.

At last, StormClan was ready, and Stripestar and Galestar pushed through the crowd of cats to approach Stoneteller's boulder. "May the stars light your path," meowed Stripestar, lowering his head respectfully.

Stoneteller's eyes glinted in the gloom. "And may the Tribe of Endless Hunting run with you, all your moons."

"You have shown us kindness," Galestar added. "And we are grateful."

"It is the mountains that are generous. You owe us nothing." Stoneteller shrugged. "I wish you safe travel on your journey. And remember my words, Clan cats."

"We will," promised Galestar.

Stoneteller gave a solemn nod.

As StormClan began to file out of the great cavern at last, Galestar couldn't resist casting one last glance back at Pebblenose. To her surprise, he met her gaze. No words passed between them, but Galestar gave him a silent nod, and Pebblenose returned it. His yellow eyes glimmered with sadness.

Another farewell. How many more would there be before their quest was done?

Galestar shook off the thought as she stepped out of the darkness of the cavern, into the bright leaf-fall sunshine.

* * *

Finally, after almost a quarter moon of endless clambering across rocky slopes in the blazing heat, StormClan left the mountains behind them.

Galestar hadn't realized how much she had been missing the cool green gloom of the forest. Now, padding once more over gentle foothills and beneath tall pine trees, she felt strangely comforted by the way the grass rippled in the wind, by the swaying shadows cast by the branches above them, and by the damp, woody scents that rose from the leaf litter.

She breathed in deeply, savoring the distant smell of squirrels scuffling in the undergrowth mingling with a fishy scent from the stream that bubbled alongside the traveling cats. Perhaps the air wasn't quite so fresh and clear down here . . . but it smelled somehow more like home.

They had followed the course of the narrow stream since sunrise, the pleasant gulp and chuckle of its crystal waters filling their ears along with the birdsong. From the sheer cliff where the water had slid and tumbled across the rocks, through moss and fern, the stream wound slowly downhill toward a distant wooded valley.

Galestar's paws ached from walking, but it was a pleasant kind of weariness. As the shadows lengthened and dusk began to fall, the cats of StormClan were still chattering happily to each other. Every cat's spirits had lifted since they had left the territory of the Tribe of Rushing Water. Even those who had been unsettled by the prophecy of Stoneteller seemed to have forgotten their worries amid the relief at being somewhere

more familiar-seeming. *Even if this land is so far away from the forest we left behind . . .*

She noticed that Stripestar was frowning as he stalked beside her.

"Is something wrong?" she murmured, keeping her voice low so as not to worry the rest of the Clan.

Stripestar shook his head. "No. Nothing. Actually, I was just thinking . . . there's something about this place. Something . . ."

"Comforting?" Galestar suggested.

"That's it!" Stripestar's eyes shone. "I feel as though . . . as though this could be a home for us."

Galestar nodded. "Me too."

They quickened their pace.

The sky had darkened, the stars glinting and glimmering overhead, when they came to a tangle of thick thornbushes that grew at the top of a short slope beside a curve of the stream. Drawn by some instinct she couldn't name, Galestar brought StormClan to a halt. Then she darted to the bushes, clambering over moss-covered rocks to reach them, and slipped through.

When she saw what lay behind, she let out a soft gasp of amazement.

She stood at the lip of a steep, stony hollow, ringed all around by thorns and rocks, so that it was impossible to see into the dip from any distance away. At the bottom, the stars shimmered back at her, reflected from a still, clear pool of water.

"Incredible," breathed Stripestar.

Galestar had been so lost in wonder that she hadn't noticed her mate come creeping to her side. "Isn't it?" she murmured. "It feels like a special place somehow."

"Special enough to make camp for the night?" mused Stripestar.

Galestar cocked her head, considering. "These rocks don't look too comfortable," she pointed out. "But we're used to that, after the mountains. There are ferns to make some nests."

"And there's water to drink," added Stripestar. "I'll get the others."

One by one, their Clanmates pushed through the bushes, each delighting as they saw the beauty of the moonlit pool for themselves. Galestar noticed now that the pool was fed by a trickle from the nearby stream that seeped quietly from among the rocks to one side.

Pebblenose would have loved this place. The thought gave her a pang of sadness, and she swatted it away as though it were a troublesome gnat.

When the Clan was assembled, Galestar led them scrambling down into the hollow until she could set her paws on a narrow, rocky path that led in a spiral downward toward the pool. Peering closer at the ground, she noticed paw prints on the path. Deep, ancient paw prints, as though from another age. A strange prickle crept across her pelt at the sight of them. "Keep to the edge!" she called back. She didn't know why, but she felt as though stepping on those old paw prints would be somehow . . . *wrong.*

As they reached the edge of the pool, StormClan was completely sheltered from the wind. Glancing up, Galestar could

see only the circle of black sky, pricked with stars. *We'll sleep well here.* Galestar was sure of it.

While most of the cats began gathering moss and ferns, Galestar noticed a few of the warriors cautiously approaching the water. Goldenleaf, the medicine cat who had belonged to WindClan, was the first to reach it. Dipping her muzzle to the water, the slender gray-and-white cat set ripples gliding away where she had touched it, making the reflection of the stars shiver and dance.

Goldenleaf jerked her head up suddenly in a spray of droplets. Wide-eyed, she turned to Stoneflower. Galestar could see some silent communication pass between them. Then Stoneflower approached the pool. The other warriors hung back, anxious, as the other medicine cat dipped his paw in to disturb the still surface.

"Great StarClan!" Stoneflower gasped. He pulled his paw out, as though something had bitten it.

"What's wrong?" Galestar demanded.

The medicine cats stared at each other, both looking utterly bewildered.

"I . . . don't know," Goldenleaf admitted after a long silence. "When I touched the water, I felt strange. Dizzy. Like I was falling and flying, all at once. It seemed as though the stars were rushing toward me, faster than thought."

Stoneflower nodded. "I felt . . . like I was somewhere else. I don't know where." He shook his head, as though trying to clear it. "I can't say what it means. Only that there is something strange about this pool."

The warriors who had hoped to drink were shuffling uneasily. Some cast glances at the shadows, as though fearful of what might be lurking nearby.

Stripestar came padding closer. "We had better leave it," he suggested. "No cat should drink from the water. It could be dangerous. It could hurt our bellies, or worse."

Galestar nodded in agreement. She tried not to let her disappointment show. She had almost begun to believe that their quest was over, and that they really had found their new home. *But there is more to this place than can be seen with our eyes,* she thought. The pool felt important, in some way she couldn't name.

But one thing she knew for certain—it did not belong to StormClan.

"Stripestar?" Galestar batted her mate with a paw. "Stripestar, wake up!"

The big tom was squirming in his sleep, his eyes shut tight, his pelt matted with sweat. He rolled and flailed with his forelegs, as though fighting some unseen enemy.

"Stripestar!" Galestar nudged him with her head, gave him a rough lick on his ear. Stripestar only let out a desperate little mew, still deep in slumber.

Finally, Galestar butted him, shoving the sleeping tom right out of their nest of ferns until he flinched and startled awake.

"What is it? What's happening?" gasped Stripestar, struggling upright and blinking the sleep from his eyes.

"Nothing!" Galestar reassured him. "You're safe. You were only having a bad dream."

Pale sunlight streamed into the hollow, turning the still waters of the pool into a shining golden disk. By night there had seemed something almost magical about this place. But in the soft light of dawn, the rocky slopes and even the pool looked ordinary enough. The sounds of stirring cats filled the air, along with the trickle of stream water across the rocks as StormClan stretched and yawned and shared tongues in the cool, crisp morning air.

Stripestar grunted and shook himself. Then he turned to lope away.

"Wait—where are you going?" Galestar demanded.

Stripestar cocked his head, puzzled. "To the dirtplace."

"You're not going to tell me what you were dreaming about?"

"Oh, that?" Stripestar shrugged. "It was nothing. I was just uncomfortable. Not enough ferns, I suppose."

Galestar frowned as her mate headed off again. *It wasn't nothing.* She was sure of that—he'd been tossing and turning all night, and she would have woken him sooner if she hadn't fallen asleep herself. Besides, she could tell when he was hiding something. His shoulders always stiffened, and his tail dropped between his legs.

What in Silverpelt was it, that he's so afraid to tell me about it?

Galestar glanced around, instinctively looking for Pebblenose to rally the Clan to move on. Then she remembered. *He's a mountain cat now.*

With a sigh, she called Tinyclaw over instead. "Get every cat ready. We'll set off as soon as we can."

"Leave it to me," murmured the big she-cat with a nod. "I'll round up the kits and—"

A sudden shriek echoed through the hollow.

"Dog!"

For a moment, Galestar thought she must have heard wrong. She saw Peaktail standing at the lip of the hollow, back arched, silhouetted against the sky. Then she caught a scent on the breeze—a foul stink that jolted her heart and made her fur stand on end.

"Run!" she screamed. "Get out of here!"

The hollow rang with terrified yowls and the scrabble of paws on rock. Every cat took off, pelts blurring as the Clan scattered, surging in every direction at once, all making for the surrounding woodland.

Galestar grabbed a frightened-looking kit in her mouth and hauled it with her, paws pounding at the rocky slope as she climbed up from the pool of water. Throwing a glance over her shoulder, she saw Stripestar leading cats up out of the hollow on the other side. Relief flashed through her.

She heard a hideous barking, and a crashing of undergrowth, and then the dog came hurtling over the edge of the hollow, half charging and half tumbling down toward the water. It was squat, thick-necked, and heavy, with a night-black pelt. It slavered wildly, its long tongue lolling, driven to distraction by the scent of so many cats all at once.

Galestar just had time to see the dog snuffling hopelessly

at the abandoned nests beside the pool—and to realize, with a second powerful rush of relief, that every cat had made it out of the camp—before it was gone from view. She raced on among the trees, leaping brambles, swerving around tree trunks, with her Clanmates running beside her.

Her heart pounded madly with fear, and with joy, all else forgotten. The joy of having made it.

The joy of being *alive*.

Chapter 12

The excitement of the dog had gotten every cat moving faster in their hurry to escape the strange pool where they had made camp. The day was cooler too—much better for travel. By sunhigh, StormClan had covered good ground under a bright gray sky and left the trees behind them.

A strange elation was crackling through Stripestar's Clanmates, and they were talking cheerfully and hopefully among themselves. Stripestar couldn't deny that after what had happened at the Thunderpath, and to Rosebush on the mountainside, it was a relief to have escaped such a deadly danger with no cats harmed. Still, he felt uneasy. And it was strange to think that for the first time since their journey began, his Clanmates seemed almost more enthusiastic than he was.

Every now and again, Stripestar sensed Galestar's gaze on him, making his pelt feel too hot and itchy. She had obviously noticed that something was wrong—he'd barely spoken a word all morning, and besides, she knew him too well not to. But he didn't want to explain.

He didn't want to tell her about the dream.

Beyond the trees, long grass had given way to stretches of

bare rock and scrubby bushes, like the foothills of the mountains all over again—but here the ground was flat and almost featureless, stretching out into the distance with no end in sight. The air was still and uncomfortably close. Stripestar's paws ached, and he felt gloomy about the prospects of prey in such an empty, barren place. At least the WindClan cats seemed happy about it. But Stripestar missed the trees. He missed the woods.

We're such a long way from home.

He blinked, angry at himself for thinking of the forest that way. Hadn't he always longed to explore the world beyond the territory of his ancestors? He just hadn't realized how *much* of it there was.

In the distance, Stripestar began to make out a shape emerging in the hazy sky. Far off on the horizon, the land rose steeply into a single mountain. It was a curious shape, with a curving, rocky summit and a jutting second peak that thrust outward, almost like a snout. *A fox's head,* thought Stripestar. *That's what it looks like.*

At any other time, he might have been amused by the thought. But a cold shiver passed through him as he recalled Stoneteller's voice, echoing in the Cave of Pointed Stones. *The place where the land falls away.* Could Stoneteller have been talking about a mountain? Maybe just like the one that rose ahead of them.

And then there was the dream. . . .

Stripestar shuddered at the memory. It had felt so frightening, though he couldn't say exactly why. There had been a

mountain in the dream, too. Staring at it, he had felt a deep sense of dread.

He had seen other visions as well, images that were strangely disconnected from each other. A white gull circling against a dark, stormy sky, swooping behind jagged mountain peaks, then out against the clouds once more. And stranger still, a rock with *legs.* Five of them, orange-gold as sunset and reaching out like the petals of a flower. But was it a rock? He could have sworn he saw it move, but he couldn't be sure. Was this the *fish* with legs Stoneteller had spoken of?

Stripestar snorted. How could he be scared of such nonsense? And yet he had felt as though the gull and the fish were . . . watching him, somehow. Waiting to see what he might do next.

Fool, he told himself. *Mouse-heart.*

He wondered again about sharing the dream with Galestar. They could laugh about it together. *A fish with legs!* But another part of him was afraid that she would see how anxious it had made him, and that she would be afraid of the dream too, even if she didn't understand it.

No, Stripestar decided. Galestar didn't need another reason to doubt that they were on the right path. He needed her to believe in this quest just as much as he did. He needed her faith, her determination to see this journey through.

He needed her.

Besides . . . Surely, if they could only avoid the place that Stoneteller had spoken of—the *lake without end*—nothing bad could happen?

"Let's rest a while." Stripestar jumped at the voice of his mate, so close. He hadn't noticed Galestar sidling up next to him. "Every cat is pawsore from these endless rocks."

Glancing back, Stripestar could see that she was right. Their Clanmates were starting to flag, with stragglers strewn out some way behind, and those in the lead all breathing hard, their conversations abandoned. They should take a break. Gather their strength.

And yet . . .

The thought of stopping made Stripestar feel even more uneasy. What if eagles swooped down on them while they rested? What if a storm broke and washed them away? What if the whole Clan decided they had had enough, and simply never got up again?

"Later," he meowed. "Please? We need prey more than rest, and this place is dead. Besides, the sooner we can find a good place to camp for the night, the sooner we can relax."

"Hmm," Galestar mewed doubtfully. But she didn't argue with him—just kept on padding silently at his side.

Stripestar was grateful beyond words that she didn't ask him about his restless night. He could tell that she wanted to. But she knew him, perhaps even better than he knew himself. He felt foolish now, remembering his resentment over their Clanmates listening to her more than him. She knew them, too.

Which made him wonder if she had already understood the unpleasant truth that he was only now starting to realize.

Some of our Clanmates are afraid to keep going, he thought. *But I'm not afraid of that.*

I'm only afraid to stop.

* * *

It was well into leaf-fall as StormClan left the rocky plateau, passing through soft, rolling moorland, fields, and copses.

The cooler air was a welcome relief, and Stripestar enjoyed the soft crunch of leaves underpaw, the foliage of the trees shading from green to yellow, orange, and brown. He felt as though he could keep on journeying forever. But the mutterings of StormClan simmered behind him as they traveled onward, like a chasing thundercloud.

We have to find a home, Galestar told Stripestar, every chance she got. *Our Clanmates are growing restless.* Each night, they stopped to hunt, eat, and sleep. But at sunrise each new day, they took off again, exploring, searching. Every cat was eager to find their new home.

But the prey was sparse, and nowhere seemed right.

It was a bright, sunny morning when they crested a rise and saw long rows of small, gnarled trees stretching out in front of them, all lined up neatly. A delicious, sweet-sour scent filled the air, making Stripestar's belly rumble. But at the same time, his hackles rose.

"There's something strange about this place," he muttered to Galestar. "Why do the trees grow in lines? And so close together?"

Galestar's whiskers quivered as she sniffed at the air. "Twolegs," she replied at last. "We should take care."

Stripestar gestured with his tail, and StormClan crept carefully down the grassy slope, sneaking in among the trees and keeping watch on all sides. As they came closer, Stripestar

recognized the scent. *Apples!* He spotted fallen fruit here and there on the ground, mostly bruised or rotten. But in the boughs above, he saw countless whole, shining apples, so many they made the branches sway heavily with their weight.

"An apple forest!" breathed Tinyclaw in wonder. "I've never seen such a thing."

Stripestar felt his heart leaping with excitement. This was just the kind of wonder he had imagined when he had dreamed of setting out into the world.

Then he froze.

The scent of Twolegs was plain now, and they could be heard in the distance, chattering to each other in their strange, harsh tongue.

Galestar waved her tail in command. Silently, StormClan took cover, lying low in the long grass that grew around the tree trunks. Stripestar saw Galestar mutter something to Mudsplash and Hazelfrond, and the two warriors stalked out in front, each hopping and clambering up into the branches of an apple tree. A few moments later, they came scampering back to their leaders, wide-eyed.

"We could see well from the treetop," Mudsplash reported. "We saw Twolegs!"

"Lots of them!" added Hazelfrond. "More than I've ever seen before, all in one place."

"Where?" Stripestar demanded.

"Some are gathered outside a Twoleg den at one end of the apple forest," explained Mudsplash. "There are monsters there too, all lined up in a row, like the trees."

"The Twoleg kits are running around and playing," Hazelfrond continued. "And some Twolegs are moving among the trees, picking apples."

Galestar shot Stripestar a glance. "I don't like it," she murmured. "We should leave this place. If we skirt around the edge, we can avoid the Twolegs altogether."

Mudsplash and Hazelfrond nodded at once in agreement.

The ugly feeling reared up again in Stripestar—the one he had first experienced in the mountains, but which was becoming uncomfortably familiar. *The Clan always agrees with her. Every time.* "I don't know," he muttered before he could think it through. "Twolegs are slow. They'd never catch us! Why waste time when we can sneak straight past them?"

Galestar looked as though she might be about to protest. But something in Stripestar's gaze must have warned her off, and instead she gave a short nod. "Perhaps . . . if we stick close to the trees."

"We'll go in single file," agreed Stripestar. "Three rows, each staying close to one of the lines of apple trees."

It took a while to divide their Clanmates up, but at last Stripestar crept forward, leading his row of cats. To his left padded Galestar, leading a line of her own, while Tinyclaw headed up the final group on Stripestar's right.

It was slow going. But they pushed on, stepping through the shadows, stumbling occasionally over fallen apples, and keeping close beneath the boughs. The long grass was still wet with dew, brushing at the cats' fur until Stripestar's legs were damp and cool.

The sounds of the Twolegs' strange chatter and laughter grew louder, and Stripestar soon spotted some of them up ahead, with their odd, brightly colored pelts, tottering on their hind legs and reaching up with their forelegs to pluck apples from the branches. Many of them were carrying odd little objects, like miniature nests made of woven twigs, which they put the apples into.

Stripestar's nose prickled with new scents that mingled with the apples. Delicious wafts of unfamiliar smells, something like fresh-kill but . . . different. *Better.* Somehow even more appetizing. He felt his mouth filling with saliva. His belly rumbled.

At the end of the row of trees, there was a stretch of neat green grass where the Twolegs had spread out some wide, colorful pelts. The pelts lay flat on the grass, weighted down with more of the miniature nests. *That's where the smells are coming from,* Stripestar realized. *Inside the nests.* He craned his neck, peering all around. The Twolegs all seemed to be busy with the apples, and these little nests of theirs were abandoned. It would be so easy to dash across and snatch whatever it was inside.

Tinyclaw approached, crawling low to the ground. "Do you smell that?" she whispered. Her eyes were wide with hunger. "I don't know what it is, but I want to eat it! Couldn't we fill our bellies while the Twolegs are distracted?"

Stripestar nodded.

Galestar darted across too. "We must be careful," she hissed. "The Twolegs didn't set this out for us! They might

come back at any moment. Who can say what they'd do if they caught us stealing from them?"

"Besides," whined Hazelfrond, "that would be scavenging. It's what kittypets do! We're warriors, aren't we?"

Stripestar bristled at being contradicted by a ThunderClan cat. *We're all StormClan cats,* he reminded himself. But still.

"I don't know about you," he murmured, "but I'm hungry. Wouldn't it be foolish to turn down this opportunity?"

"I suppose . . . ," mewed Galestar. "There was precious little prey on the moorland. And this would be a *kind* of hunting. I mean, we'd be taking it from the Twolegs. Not accepting it as a gift. *That's* what kittypets do."

She doesn't sound convinced, thought Stripestar. All the same, he ignored his misgivings. "I'll go," he whispered. "Tinyclaw, Fernwhisper, and Tumbletail—you come with me."

As he and the others crept off, Stripestar noticed Galestar watching him with a frown, almost of disapproval. *We agreed, though, didn't we?* Then he realized—he had chosen only ThunderClan cats to accompany him. Should he have chosen some cats from WindClan, too? Once again, he had to remind himself that it didn't matter. *StormClan is StormClan!* There was no ThunderClan, nor WindClan either. Not anymore.

So Galestar had no reason to be annoyed with him, did she?

Besides, he had known these cats since he was a kit. He'd hunted with them a hundred times. It just . . . made sense. *And anyway, there's no time to explain all of that now.*

Slowly, cautiously, the four cats wormed their way through

the long grass. Stripestar's ears were pricked, listening closely for any sign that the Twolegs were coming back. *Nothing so far.* His whole body thrummed with excitement—just as much as if they were hunting real prey. Perhaps more, because no mouse or squirrel was half as dangerous as an angry Twoleg.

The scent was mouthwatering, and Stripestar couldn't wait to sink his teeth into whatever was giving off such a smell. They reached the colorful pelts, and Stripestar was just dipping his head toward the closest of the woven nests, when a loud burst of Twoleg noise made him leap nearly out of his fur.

Jerking his head up, Stripestar saw a pair of Twoleg kits running toward them. His stomach lurched. *Hare dung!* The strong scent from the nests must have overwhelmed the smell of the approaching Twolegs. He froze, thinking fast.

"Do we run?" asked Tinyclaw.

Stripestar didn't answer. He had no idea what to do. He'd never seen Twolegs so close before, and it was a fearsome sight. Even though they were kits, they towered over the cats, each clumsy paw step making the ground tremble. They stared down at the cats, making curious noises. To Stripestar's relief, they didn't sound angry. *But what do they want?*

A blur of tabby pelt flickered in the corner of Stripestar's eye, as Flash came running over. "Stay calm!" he panted. "They won't hurt us!"

"How do you know?" growled Tumbletail, back arched as he glared up at the peculiar Twolegs.

"Those sounds they're making," Flash explained. "Twolegs

kits *like* cats, mostly. They're excited. They're interested. I promise, they mean no harm."

"We can trust them, then?" asked Stripestar.

Flash nodded. He had been a WindClan warrior, but before that he had been a kittypet—the only one in the whole of StormClan. "Believe me, I can read Twolegs as well as if they were cats. See? That one's a little afraid of us."

Stripestar peered at the male Twoleg kit that Flash had pointed out. The kit was hanging back. While his companion was bending her hind legs to crouch low and examine the cats, the male was hovering, shifting from paw to paw. *He does look anxious,* Stripestar realized.

"Will they let us take their fresh-kill?" he asked Flash.

"Let's see." Flash sauntered toward the female Twoleg kit, purring gently. He wound his way between the kit's hairless legs, brushing his fur against the creature's pink skin. The Twolegs swept one of its huge forepaws across Flash's fur and head.

"It's almost like they're sharing tongues!" gasped Tinyclaw, sounding half amazed and half disgusted.

"See? Nothing bad will happen," meowed Flash.

No sooner had Flash spoken than the Twoleg kit heaved him up suddenly in both forepaws, straightening its hind legs and turning the warrior over in its forelegs until Flash's belly faced the sky, his paws scrabbling at the air.

"What in Silverpelt . . . ," gasped Tumbletail.

The black tom started forward, but Stripestar stayed him with a hiss. "I think it's all right," he murmured.

The four cats stared, astonished, at Flash. He was purring loudly with contentment, his whiskers shivering as the Twoleg pawed at his belly and cooed in his face. "Don't worry!" Flash called down to them. "Some Twolegs just like to do this. I don't know why!"

"But why is he . . . *enjoying* it so much?" wondered Fernwhisper, her yellow eyes wide with distaste.

Stunned, Stripestar watched the second Twoleg kit warily approach. It reached out a blunt claw of its own and carefully smoothed the fur on Flash's head. The warrior closed his eyes and leaned into the touch, still making soft, happy sounds.

"Well . . . I don't think he's in danger," Stripestar murmured. "Even if he does have bees in his brain."

"Wait!" Flash cautioned, when Stripestar swung his head back toward the delicious smells coming from the small nest. "Watch."

The Twoleg kits spoke to each other briefly. Then the male Twoleg bent down low and reached into the little nest, rummaging around. At last he brought out something and gingerly offered it to Flash. The warrior leaned forward and nibbled at it.

Tumbletail gave a low growl. "I don't know what this is," he grumbled. "But it's definitely not hunting."

The Twoleg kits seemed pleased. They made more curious noises as they watched Flash eating from the male kit's paw.

Then the male kit crouched down and reached into the little nest a second time, drawing more things out of it. He

stretched his paw out low, close to Stripestar's nose, uncurling his odd blunt claws to reveal a few scraps of white meat.

"Careful," warned Tinyclaw, flinching away from the Twolegs.

Heart pounding, Stripestar crept forward and sniffed at the white meat. *Strange.* It was cold . . . yet it didn't smell like crow-food. In fact, it smelled good. *Very* good. So good he could feel his mouth watering with anticipation.

Flash gestured with a paw. "Try it!"

Stripestar could feel Tumbletail, Fernwhisper, and Tinyclaw hovering, uncertain, at his back. He could sense their anxiety. And he didn't much like the thought of plucking food from a Twoleg's paw, either. But that smell . . .

Closing his eyes, he darted in and snatched up a piece of meat. He chewed slowly.

"Well? What's it like?" asked Fernwhisper.

Stripestar hardly heard her. He was lost in the glorious mouthful, the meat so soft and tender, the flavor so rich and sweet and . . .

"It's . . . *delicious*," he breathed.

His three companions jostled forward, each snapping up a bit of white meat to try for themselves.

"Great StarClan!" gasped Tinyclaw, through a mouthful.

"This must be what they eat in StarClan's hunting grounds," murmured Fernwhisper.

Tumbletail didn't say a word—he'd already finished his piece and was lunging for another.

Stripestar turned to where the rest of StormClan were

waiting, crouched and watching nervously from the shade beneath the apple trees. "It's safe!" he called. "Come on, all of you—eat your fill!"

Many of the cats still looked doubtful. Even Galestar was hesitating. But one or two of the braver young apprentices darted forward to take a piece of meat for themselves. The Twoleg kit dug into the nest again and brought out more scraps of the divine meat to offer around.

As more cats crowded in to feast, tails swaying with delight, Stripestar gazed in wonder at the Twoleg kits. He couldn't believe how frightened StormClan had been when they'd first come running! But now his Clanmates' courage was being rewarded.

For the first time since his dream beside the moonlit pool, Stripestar felt a flicker of the old fire kindling in his belly. He still believed in StormClan. And surely this was a sign—if not from StarClan, then from the Tribe of Endless Hunting. It showed they should forge on, even in the face of dangers. It *proved* it!

He turned to Galestar, expecting to see her eyes shining with hope once again. But she wasn't looking at him at all. Instead she stood on all fours, tense and alert, gazing back into the apple forest. "Run!" she shrieked suddenly. "Every cat, run!"

With a cold rush, Stripestar saw what his mate had seen. *Twolegs!* And not kits this time. These ones were fully grown and charging along one of the rows of trees toward StormClan and the kits. They were still a couple of tree-lengths

away, but gaining fast. They waved their forelegs and began to bellow in their horrible, harsh language.

Flash yowled and twisted in the air, barely landing on his paws as the female kit dropped him. The Twoleg kits looked startled and frightened, as though they had done something wrong.

One thing was certain. *The feast is over.*

"Run!" Stripestar raised his voice alongside his mate's. And StormClan fled from the apple forest, scattering in every direction, like leaves tossed on a leaf-fall wind.

Chapter 13

Frost had speckled the land with silver. The trees were all bare, the skies white with cloud, and Galestar's breath misted in the chilly air. Perched high up on top of the Twoleg den, she gazed out across the valley, taking in the frozen stream and the skeletal branches of the woodland, and marveled at how much it had all changed in just a few moons.

Ever since StormClan had made camp here, this had been Galestar's favorite spot to come and sit for a while, alone with her thoughts. The surface sloped gently up toward a raised ridge in the middle and was covered with square, overlapping bits of flat stone. They were cold and hard underpaw, but together they kept the rain off better than any shelter Galestar had ever slept under back in the forest. Here, out in the open, she could have a little peace and quiet. Yet she could still hear the comforting meows and pattering of cats' paws coming from the den beneath her.

Thank StarClan for the gift of this place! she thought once again. *Or thank whoever it is who is looking out for us.* They had stumbled on it the very same day they had fled the apple forest—a huge Twoleg den, and empty, with no Twoleg scent to speak of. They had hardly been able to believe their luck.

Most of the Clan had been fearful at first, especially after the apple forest, so Galestar had persuaded Stripestar that they should wait for a few days and keep watch. No Twoleg came. No monster either. And at last they had made the decision to move in and take the soft Twoleg nests for their own.

Of course, Stripestar had insisted that their good fortune was a sign that they were heading in the right direction. He had even tried to convince Galestar that what had happened at the apple forest had been a sign, too. To Galestar, it was obvious that the Twoleg kits had been trying to trick the cats, feeding them scraps to distract them, so that the adult Twolegs could attack. But Stripestar hadn't seen it that way. Starry-eyed as ever, he had tried to persuade her that the Twoleg kits really were trying to help them.

Sometimes it seemed as though *everything* was a good omen, as far as Stripestar was concerned.

Galestar sighed, her thoughts clouding with anxiety. There had been a distance between the two of them for some time now. She had been spending more and more time up here alone, while Stripestar went prowling in the undergrowth that grew around the Twoleg den, always returning with a glazed look in his eyes, as though deeply lost in thought. He was worried about something, and Galestar kept hoping that he would tell her what it was.

But he never did.

From somewhere below, Galestar heard a soft click and snap. It was the noise made by the strange transparent entrance, like a sheet of frozen water that flapped to and fro. StormClan used it to push their way in and out of the Twoleg den.

Stripestar!

Sure enough, when she crept to the edge of the den and peered over, she saw the familiar brown tabby pelt of her mate emerging from the back of the den. He slunk away toward the bushes, his breaths visible in the cold air. Doubtless heading off to spend more time by himself. More time obsessing over some problem, or some pain, that he wouldn't share with her.

Was it about Flash, she wondered? The WindClan warrior had proved invaluable since they'd moved into the den. He had warned them to avoid the shining, sharp-edged tools in the space where the Twolegs prepared their food, and not to chew on the thick black vines that connected so many strange objects to the sides of the den. Galestar had sensed irritation in Stripestar every time Flash shared his wisdom. *Is he so threatened by another tom's voice? Especially the voice of a WindClan tom?* The thought made her uncomfortable, and she shook it off.

Enough. It was time to find out the truth.

"Stripestar!" Galestar mewed, before she could think better of it. "Up here."

The tom flinched and froze. His eyes darted left and right before he glanced up and blinked in surprise. "Galestar?"

"Join me," Galestar asked him. "Please?"

To her relief, Stripestar didn't hesitate. He darted to the side of the den, then hopped up from ledge to ledge until he had reached the very top. He came trotting over to Galestar and they sat side by side—close, but not quite touching. Staring out across the frozen valley.

"So this is where you've been hiding," Stripestar murmured.

Galestar shrugged. "It's quiet up here. I can hear myself think."

"I know what you mean." He nodded his approval, then gave a soft sigh. "I like it."

A familiar warmth was building in Galestar's chest. Just when she felt he might be slipping away from her, Stripestar always found a way to remind her of how close they were. How well they understood each other. She wasn't going to throw that away. Not now. Not ever.

"Tell me the truth," she meowed. "There is something gnawing at you. Something eating you alive. Why won't you share it with me?"

Stripestar hung his head. He inspected his paws one at a time. He was doing everything he could not to look at her. "You know . . . ," he muttered vaguely.

"Do I?" Galestar held her tongue, taking a moment to calm herself. "I know you don't want to talk about it, Stripestar," she mewed softly. "That's as clear as the moon on a cloudless night. But I hate seeing you like this. And you can't keep batting me away."

Stripestar stiffened, as though fearful of what she might say next.

This isn't about Flash, she realized. This was something deeper. Something more painful. And she found her thoughts returning to a place where they had lingered too often, in the peaceful time since they'd found this den.

"I wonder if . . ." Galestar swallowed hard. Now that she had come to it, the words seemed to stick like feathers in her

throat. "I wonder if it's the same thing that weighs on me. Even on our brightest days. The pain we felt when . . . when we lost our kits."

Her throat was closing up, but she pushed on. "We never talked much about that, did we? We left the forest so quickly afterward. We never grieved. I think we were too busy trying to save the Clan to spare a thought for ourselves and our loss. But it hurts. I feel as though it will always hurt. And I feel that . . . if we *don't* talk about it, it may fester, like a wound gone bad. Am I right, Stripestar? Is that what's burdening you?"

Her mate looked stunned, his eyes wide, his fur prickling, as though he were caught in the bright blazing eyes of a monster. He opened his mouth and closed it again. He didn't seem to know what to say.

Galestar waited patiently.

Then all at once, Stripestar crumpled. He sagged against her. Surprised, she had to hold him up, carry his weight with her body. "They were everything," he gasped. "Everything I ever wanted."

For a long time, they stayed that way, each leaning into the other, both racked by quiet sorrow.

"You're right," Stripestar admitted, pulling gently away from her at last. "We never spoke about it. I didn't even let myself *think* about it. It was too awful. So I ignored it. I hid my sadness away in the shadows within my mind, and I never looked at it again. I devoted myself to our future. To StormClan's future. But the pain . . ."

His voice quavered again, and again Galestar leaned in,

brushing her warm flank against his and curling her tail around him tightly.

"I'd felt so much joy," Stripestar continued. "So much hope in imagining us as a family, with our kits. I couldn't believe what happened. I . . . still can't."

"Me neither," whispered Galestar. "Me neither."

They huddled close in their grief, and all the warmth and love that Galestar felt for her mate came bubbling up inside her. It had never gone away, she realized. Only been buried deep down.

At length Galestar sniffed away her sorrow and straightened. "I've felt the same way," she confessed. "I tried not to think of it. But that was impossible. And there were moments—whole days, even—when I felt as though I couldn't go on, even though I knew I had to. But now . . . just knowing we can share this sadness between us . . . it feels easier, somehow."

Stripestar nodded and a silence stretched between them once again.

"I wanted them to be the first StormClan kits," Stripestar murmured, finally. "I wanted it so badly. I thought they would unite our Clan. I thought they would be the making of StormClan."

"And they will be."

Stripestar glanced up, seemingly startled by the fierceness in Galestar's voice.

She gazed at him, her heart filling with determination, and with love. "We must honor them, Stripestar. We must make

sure that StormClan endures, always. In their memory. For our lost kits."

Stripestar shook his head, astonished. He was staring at her in awe, his eyes shining with that dreamy look that she adored so much. "For our lost kits," he echoed. "Sometimes I forget how strong you are, Galestar. But I don't want you to feel alone. Never again. I want us to share everything. All the joy . . . and all the pain."

There was nothing more to say. Galestar felt a deep peace settle across her, like a cool blanket of snow. Silently they nuzzled close to each other, looking out into the far distance and thinking of the kits that they would never have a chance to raise—but that they would love and honor all the same. *Always.* And for a long time, they simply sat and enjoyed the warmth, the softness, and the familiar shape of each other, the thrum of their purrs mingling and vibrating, as though they were one cat and not two.

Maybe we can heal, Galestar dared to think. And they had to. Because if they didn't, there could be no future, for them or for StormClan.

The icy landscape rose and fell away from them, rolling off into a never-ending horizon. Somewhere out there was a place for StormClan. Galestar felt more sure of that than ever. After all, hadn't Stripestar been right all those many moons ago at the Gathering? The world was so much bigger than any cat could ever imagine. They'd already discovered that. Which meant there was hope. There would always be hope.

If they could only survive. Keep going. *Endure.*

* * *

"You'll never catch me, fuzz-brain!"

Stepping in from outside, Galestar and Stripestar had barely set paw in the Twoleg den before they had to dodge the young apprentice Wasppaw, who came whooping and tearing past, claws scrabbling for purchase on the wooden ground. Her brother Quailpaw was in hot pursuit, spitting feathers. But he pulled up, wide-eyed at the sight of their leaders.

"Oh, StarClan! We're sorry, Galestar. Sorry, Stripestar. We were just—"

"Having fun," Stripestar interrupted, beaming. "I'm glad to see it. And don't let us stop you."

As the apprentices raced off again, hurling playful insults at each other, Galestar and her mate shared a happy glance. *What a relief, to see the Clan enjoying themselves at last!* thought Galestar. And Wasppaw, Quailpaw, and Pigeonpaw were the first apprentices to have been made in StormClan, apprentices made by Galestar and Stripestar together, soon followed by the other kits who had left the forest with them. It made StormClan feel more settled somehow.

Strolling through the den, side by side, they saw Pigeonpaw and Palepaw tussling on the ledged hill that led up to the higher level. Peaktail and Harewhisker were sharing tongues close by, while Tumbletail was proudly showing off a little pile of mice he had caught high at the top of the Twoleg den. "It's just the best place for hunting," he was telling Whitebreeze. "Flash told me. You sit waiting in the shadows, they come scuttling, and . . ." He sliced his paw through the air. "Pounce!"

"Yes, yes," grumbled Whitebreeze. "Now can we eat already? I'm starving!"

Galestar let out a long sigh of contentment as they entered the cavernous area where the dove-gray ground was softer than moss and the long Twoleg nests were all arranged around a mysterious flat black object, which Flash had told them sometimes came alive with colorful pictures at night, and which Twolegs liked to stare at.

The cheerful chatter of their Clan filled their ears. Stoneflower was cautiously pawing at the flat black thing while Flash eagerly explained yet again how it worked. Hazelfrond lay belly-up on one of the big Twoleg nests, squirming happily with her eyes shut tight, while Goldenleaf and Tinyclaw shared prey quietly in a corner, the blood seeping into the soft ground.

Every cat feels safe here, Galestar realized. *Every cat is warm, and happy, and well fed.*

Could StormClan stay here forever? Was this their home now—for good? It was a pleasant thought. There was plenty of prey, in the den and out of it. They would be sheltered through every season. And when Galestar recalled their time in the forest—the terrified flight from the burning ThunderClan camp, the loss of their kits, going begging to Birchstar and Snakestar—they seemed like the memories of another cat entirely. It was a long time since she had felt so desperate, even if there had been moments along the journey when she'd come close.

Our troubles are behind us, she told herself.

And for the first time, she could almost believe it.

"Galestar?"

Tugged from her thoughts, Galestar saw Huntheart approaching. The black-and-white tom was one of the largest, toughest, and most experienced warriors of WindClan. But he looked oddly nervous as he dipped his head, not meeting her eye.

At his side was Fernwhisper, the tawny she-cat from ThunderClan. It was she who had first challenged Galestar, all those moons ago, when she came visiting Stripestar to apologize for the death of his first mate. Fernwhisper had spoken fiercely to Galestar that night. But now, like Huntheart, she was looking almost . . . *embarrassed*. But excited, too.

For some reason she couldn't name, Galestar felt her pelt prickling with unease.

"What is it, Fernwhisper?" asked Stripestar. "Another quarrel over prey?"

"No, nothing like that," answered Fernwhisper swiftly. She and Huntheart shared a quick, furtive glance. "We were hoping we could speak with you both . . . alone."

"Of course," Galestar replied, her voice quavering despite her best efforts. "We'll go outside."

Galestar's heart was pounding as she and Stripestar led the way, pushing through the transparent scrap of ice at the back of the den and padding around to where the Twolegs had built a shelter over the front entrance.

"Well?" Stripestar asked when the four cats were all settled there. "What's wrong?"

Fernwhisper and Huntheart hesitated. A silent communication seemed to pass between them, and then Fernwhisper

cleared her throat. "Nothing's wrong," she meowed. "Nothing at all. Actually, it's the opposite. We have good news. Wonderful news."

"Fernwhisper is expecting kits," mewed Huntheart.

The words seemed to sink like stones, deep in Galestar's heart. Thoughts swirled around her head—horrible, uncomfortable thoughts. *A ThunderClan she-cat can't bear the litter of a WindClan tom!* Which was nonsense. Because hadn't she and Stripestar done the very same thing? And anyway, weren't they all StormClan now?

But that was what hurt so much. *The first StormClan kits.* And they didn't belong to her and Stripestar.

Dimly she was aware of Stripestar darting forward to touch foreheads with Huntheart in congratulations, and to nuzzle gently against Fernwhisper's flank. Galestar knew she should be doing the very same thing. But she couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. It seemed as though the world had frozen.

"We wanted you to be the first to know," Fernwhisper was mewing. Still, Galestar couldn't take it in.

Pull yourself together, she scolded herself. StormClan only existed because she and Stripestar had fallen in love. Cats from different Clans, just like Fernwhisper and Huntheart. And yet a whining, kitlike voice wailed from deep inside her.

It isn't right. It isn't fair.

After losing their litter so cruelly, did she have to be happy for Fernwhisper and Huntheart?

"I'm delighted for you." It was like coughing up a hairball, but she managed to get the words out. She forced herself to look pleased. "The first StormClan kits! This is a joyful day."

She began to notice some of her Clanmates lurking among the bushes, watching from the corner of the Twoleg den. They must have been curious and come to investigate. Galestar suddenly wished she were somewhere else—anywhere else. Then she cursed herself for being so petty.

"Come, all of you!" Stripestar beckoned with his tail, and the Clanmates drew near. More of them were emerging all the time. Apparently word had traveled fast. "Fernwhisper is heavy with kits!" Stripestar announced. "StormClan kits!"

Galestar felt queasy as she watched her mate beaming, his eyes shining with happiness—*real* happiness. It made her feel even more disgusted with herself. *Why can't I be like him?* And yet, at the same time, a flicker of anger flared in her guts. *I thought we shared this pain. . . . And now I feel more alone than ever.*

She shrank back, unnoticed, as her Clanmates swarmed around Huntheart and Fernwhisper, brushing flanks and giving congratulatory licks and raising a yowling chant up to the ice-white sky. "StormClan! StormClan! StormClan!"

The shelter above their ears shuddered as a cat jumped onto it. Then Goldenleaf came leaping down, landing in a crouch on the dirt path that led to the Twoleg den.

For some reason, the medicine cat's arrival silenced all the Clan. It seemed that every cat had sensed that Goldenleaf had something important to say.

Goldenleaf prowled in a circle, muscles taut. She stopped, gazing upward. Then with a few fast movements, she scratched something into the cold ground, claws raking the dirt. She sat back, at peace. And, after a few moments, she nodded her head, as though giving permission for the Clan to approach.

Edging closer, among the other cats, Galestar peered in wonder at what Goldenleaf had drawn. A jagged line, like a bolt of lightning, with horizontal lines scored right across it. They reminded Galestar of a gust of fast-moving wind.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I saw this shape last night, in a dream," Goldenleaf explained, quietly. "I had no idea what it meant. But now . . . now I think I do. Lightning and wind, combined. Somehow it represents our Clan—how we were formed of two smaller clans. It is the mark of StormClan."

"A dream," Stripestar marveled. "A vision!"

"From StarClan?" muttered Galestar. "Or from some other power?"

"Oh, what does it matter?" cried Stripestar. He was thrumming with excitement, his ears pricked, his whiskers twitching, as he hopped ecstatically from paw to paw. "And on the eve of such wonderful news! The first trueborn StormClan kits. Who can deny it now?" He raised his voice, caterwauling up to the distant clouds. "We are StormClan! And we are on the rightful path!"

As the Clan lent their voices, sending a full-throated roar up into the cold leaf-bare air, Galestar stared at Stripestar. It was as though he had forgotten their own kits entirely. She didn't feel excited—only numb with shock, and with disbelief. Could it really be that StarClan was watching over them once again? Was that all it took—the news of a coming litter?

Stripestar was right about one thing. She couldn't deny that StormClan felt somehow more . . . *real* now. Like a true Clan. At last.

But she couldn't deny her own feelings, either. A fleeting sadness that took her by surprise at the thought that WindClan and ThunderClan really were finished. And a deeper sadness, still as raw as the day it had begun, when she thought of the three cold little bundles that she had left behind, buried in the forest so many moons ago.

Chapter 14

Stripestar had found a new favorite spot in the Twoleg den.

All through the cold nights of leaf-bare, he and his Clanmates had huddled in the cozy warmth of the big Twoleg nests at the top of the ledged hill. But now that the first pale sunbeams of newleaf were creeping into the den, Stripestar preferred to curl up on the wooden ground where the sun shone in a perfect square. He lay there now, lazily batting at the dust motes and watching them swirl and dance in the light, while the sun warmed his pelt and the wood beneath him.

By all the stars, this was the life!

It had been the easiest leaf-bare that Stripestar could remember. He couldn't help but marvel at how perfectly this den kept out the wind and the rain and the cold. *Perhaps Twolegs do have some use after all!* StormClan had explored every inch of the place and had made it their own. It was a good den—a *wonderful* den—and the difference in every cat was plain to see. They were growing fat with all the mice and the squirrels and the rabbits they had caught. Stripestar had never seen them so relaxed. So well rested. He had never seen their fur so sleek and soft.

It's almost enough to make you want to become a kittypet!

Stripestar snorted with amusement at the thought. Immediately embarrassed, he twisted to peer all around him, but no cat was around to have heard. Galestar had led a hunting patrol out earlier in the morning. And the rest of the Clan was spread out through the den, resting, enjoying all the peace and comfort that the Twoleg den had to offer.

Yawning and stretching, Stripestar sank back once more, feeling his muscles loosen. Ever since the start of newleaf, his worries had melted away like snow in thaw. The dream that had scared him so much was only a dream. Stoneteller's prophecy was surely mistaken. They had never seen a fish with legs! They had never even settled on a mountain. It was all just nonsense.

The ground vibrated beneath him, and Fernwhisper's kits came rolling and tumbling in, a blur of teeth and whiskers and fur as they wrestled and scrapped with each other. The sight brought joy to Stripestar's heart. *Our Clan's very first litter.* Their parents had named them Windkit, Rainkit, and Lightningkit—and together they really were like a storm raging wherever they went.

Perhaps *they* were the storm that Stoneteller had foreseen? If so, there really was nothing to fear. The arrival of the kits had brought the whole Clan together. It had given every cat so much joy.

At least, every cat except Galestar. Even though she was always trying her hardest to look pleased, Stripestar could tell.

Three kits—just like our own litter.

Stripestar swallowed down the sudden swell of sadness. Shaking himself, he rolled up onto his paws and fixed the trio of kits with a mock-stern glare. "Now, you tasty little voles, I'm feeling awfully hungry . . . I might have to eat you all up!"

The kits squealed with delight as Stripestar lunged, rolling his eyes and swiping playfully at them.

"We'll eat you up first!"

"Get on his back! Go on, quick!"

"Look out!"

"Oh no, you've got me!" Stripestar pretended to groan as he sank to the ground, letting the kits overpower him. "Don't eat me all at once, or—"

He froze, listening.

The kits must have sensed that something was wrong. They fell silent at once. Slowly they slid to the ground, their eyes wide with fear.

In the quiet, Stripestar strained his ears. He was almost sure he had heard something. And yes, there it was. Distant, but gradually coming closer. A low rumble that filled his heart with dread.

Monster!

He could hear its strange round paws crunching the pebbles on the dirt path that led to the front entrance, and he knew that it was coming here. To the den.

Stripestar sprang up on all fours, his pelt bristling.

"What is it?" cried Rainkit. "What's that noise?"

"It hurts my ears!" wailed Lightningkit.

"Just stay here," Stripestar told them. "The Clan will protect you."

He could hear paws on wood all throughout the den as his Clanmates roused themselves. They all must have heard it by now. Huntheart flew into the room, gathered his kits, and muttered comforting words as Stripestar hurried out into the central part of the den where the Twoleg entrance was. Cats were already milling there in disarray, their tails stiff with panic.

The flap at the back of the den swished and clicked. Galestar hurtled inside, followed by the rest of the hunting patrol. They were overloaded with prey—rabbits and squirrels and even a plump wood pigeon. But they looked frightened as they dumped it all on the fresh-kill pile in one corner.

"Did you hear it?" Stripestar asked. "The monster?"

"We saw it," Galestar confirmed. "We came back to warn the Clan. It's coming here, with Twolegs in its belly."

Stripestar's blood ran cold.

"Up here!" Flash called, from a ledge beside the Twoleg entrance, where a transparent square let the light in. "You can see everything."

Stripestar and Galestar hopped up beside Flash, followed by Tinyclaw.

Sure enough, the monster was rolling to a halt just outside the den. It was very large and dark red—the color of blood. Its growl cut out, and a moment later its hide split apart, unleashing Twolegs. Stripestar counted five of them, his alarm mounting all the time. Two were mere kits, and a third looked

bent and old, with curling white fur on its head. But the remaining two were fully grown adult Twolegs.

As they watched, one of the adults went around to the hindquarters of the monster, pulled up another large section of its hide, and began hauling things out—large, heavy objects that Stripestar didn't recognize. *Twoleg junk,* he thought, fiercely. Fear was churning his belly, but anger, too. *This is our den,* he thought wildly. *It belongs to StormClan!*

"What do they want?" Galestar asked Flash.

But Flash just shook his head slowly, as though he didn't have a clue.

Stripestar's neck fur prickled with irritation. Ever since they'd arrived, Flash had been strutting around the den, doling out wisdom about Twolegs like *he* was leader of StormClan. *And now, when we actually need him, he's lost for words?*

"Why didn't you warn us?" Stripestar demanded. "Why didn't you tell us that Twolegs would come?"

"I didn't know!" Flash protested. "I've never seen anything like this. When I was a kittypet, the Twolegs never left for more than a quarter moon or two at a time. I thought this place was abandoned for good!"

The whole Clan had gathered now on the wooden ground beneath the ledge, all muttering and yowling with consternation. Heart pounding, Stripestar turned to address them. "StormClan! Make ready!" he told them.

"For what?" wailed Fernwhisper.

"What's happening?" Peaktail demanded.

Stripestar didn't know what to say. Despair was clouding

his thoughts. He'd never dreamed that Twolegs would come here—not after so long. What were they doing? Were they trying to take it for themselves, just like StormClan had?

"They're coming!" warned Tinyclaw before Stripestar could speak.

Craning his neck, Stripestar saw the Twoleg Clan approaching the entrance to the den, each carrying one of the big, heavy-looking objects. They were chattering away, sounding cheerful. *They don't know we're here,* Stripestar realized. A fumbling noise could be heard just beyond the entrance. Then a clatter and click of something against the wood.

"We'll face them together," Galestar called over the desperate yowling of the Clan. She leaped down, landing in front of the entrance. "Get away, every cat!"

The Clan followed Galestar's instructions at once. They hung back, hovering in the shadows and watching the entrance with wide, terrified eyes.

Stripestar jumped down and took his place at Galestar's side.

"Do you think we can fight them?" whispered Galestar. "If it comes to that?"

"Maybe . . ." Stripestar wished he believed it. "We outnumber them, but . . ."

"But they're so big," Galestar finished. "And they have a monster. What if it attacks?"

"Perhaps they'll just go away when they see that the den is taken?" But even as he spoke the words, Stripestar knew how hopeless it sounded.

With a creak, the entrance swung open.

Stripestar unleashed his claws. He steeled himself, back arched, ready for anything.

Slowly, horribly, the first of the Twolegs came clomping in, each paw step shaking the ground. It was one of the adults. He was so vast that he blocked the sunlight, throwing a long and beastly shadow across the cats. He set down the big, squarish object he was carrying, with a deafening crash that made several warriors flinch.

Then he saw StormClan and stopped dead. For a moment, nothing moved. The Twolegs spoke not a word.

Suddenly, the spell was broken, and the Twoleg Clan began clamoring all at once. *They're so loud!* thought Stripestar, stunned with horror. One of their kits was sneezing, clutching her mouth and stumbling away. The big adult was making angry noises, pointing a blunt claw at the fresh-kill pile that StormClan had made in the corner. The other adult made a hideous retching noise and put a paw over her nose.

"What do we do?" hissed Stripestar. But Galestar had no more answers than he did.

"We can't beat them!" mewed Flash from behind. "Trust me. They're too strong!"

Stripestar smothered another surge of irritation. Then he remembered what Flash had done in the apple forest, when they'd last encountered Twolegs. *Perhaps they'll take pity on us. Like those Twoleg kits did.*

Licking his lips, Stripestar tried to hunch down low, making himself as small as possible. He wormed across the ground,

opening his eyes wide and purring softly. All the while, he was burning with shame. But he would do anything for StormClan. Anything to protect their future.

He'd hardly taken a step forward, before the big male Twoleg swung a hind paw in a vicious swipe.

Stripestar rolled and sprang up, baring his teeth and snarling. *So it's like that, is it?* "Intruders!" he cried. "This is *our* territory. *StormClan* territory! Attack!"

The Clan came surging, raising an angry caterwaul of their own. Stripestar's blood ran hot as he and Galestar joined the throng, leaping at the Twolegs.

The big male gasped and took a step back. But the female adult was still coming forward, holding a short black tube full of sloshing liquid. With a jerk, she sprayed it across the Clan. Stripestar yelped and squirmed. It was in his eyes! It was in his fur, damp and cold and nasty!

Wet and wailing, the leading warriors turned tail, rushing straight into their oncoming Clanmates. The attack collapsed into chaos, the whole of StormClan reduced to a whimpering, frightened mass of desperate cats.

A second spurt of liquid came arcing down, drenching Stripestar to the skin. He squirmed and squealed with helpless rage. "How dare they!" he yelped.

The male Twoleg let out a furious bellow and stamped his paw on the ground so hard it made Stripestar's heart jump with fear.

"Retreat!" Galestar's loud, clear voice rose above the mayhem.

Finally the cats began moving together. They swarmed back through the den, crowding and cramming themselves, one by one, through the transparent entrance at the back of the Twoleg den.

Sodden and dripping, Stripestar scampered after them, still flushed with shame and disgust.

The Twolegs didn't follow. They didn't need to.

As he slipped out of the den—the very last to leave—Stripestar cursed himself, cursed the Twolegs, and cursed StarClan. He ran across the grass beyond, pausing only to take one last glance back, to try and fix it in his memory.

The best home that StormClan had ever had, or could ever *hope* to have.

We've lost it.

Chapter 15

When will this all end? Galestar wondered, yet again. *Always moving on. Never finding any place to call home.*

Last night they had made camp in a ditch, still damp and muddy from the newleaf rains. The night before, they had made do with a copse of spindly silver birch trees that barely offered any shelter at all. The night before *that*, StormClan had simply dropped, exhausted, in the long grass of a field, then slept fitfully through a depressing drizzle that had persisted all through the night.

This morning had dawned bright and sunny, but before long the sky had clouded over and the rains had come again, sudden and hard. Now the Clan trudged across wet fields under a glowering gray sky, paws sinking deep in mud with every step. They followed the side of a roaring Thunderpath, pressing on through yet more murky drizzle that made their whiskers droop and their damp bodies shiver with cold.

There wasn't even any prey to be scented. The only smells to fill their nostrils were the wet soil, the acrid stink of the Thunderpath, and the monsters that plowed past, flattening their ears and making them cringe with their deafening howls.

Galestar's thoughts had turned unsettled, too, just like the weather.

Could it really have been a moon since they fled the Twoleg den?

Stripestar had sunk into a deep gloom after the Twolegs came, and for a time he had left all the decisions to Galestar. At first she'd insisted that they wait, watching the den from a distance. Perhaps the Twolegs would go away again? But the blood-skinned monster had stood guard, day and night, and Twoleg chatter filled the den from sunrise to sunset.

The Twolegs were going nowhere. The Clan became restless. And at last Galestar had had no choice but to lead them onward once again.

Slowly, gradually, Galestar had managed to lift Stripestar out of his bad mood. Together they had scouted out some other, similar Twoleg dens close by. But every single one seemed to have filled up with Twolegs, each group with their own monster to protect themselves.

Galestar let out a bitter groan at the memory. *It's as though newleaf summoned them all!*

After that, StormClan had simply pushed on aimlessly, desperately hoping for somewhere they could stay. Instead they'd run into problem after problem. Even the most promising camps turned out to have badger-scent among the tree roots, or Twolegs arriving without warning, or shelter that proved hopeless at the first patter of rain.

Not that Galestar or any of the old WindClan cats really minded that. In fact, some of these fields reminded her of

their old home on the moor, but Stripestar and the ThunderClan cats were having none of it. *Toughen up,* she wanted to tell them whenever Stripestar found fault with some perfectly good patch of open ground. But as usual, she held her tongue.

It seemed as though nothing they found was good enough. Not after the comfort and safety of the Twoleg den.

Galestar heard some cat stumble behind her and turned to see that poor Fernwhisper had gotten one paw stuck in a boggy stretch of ground and was trying to pull it out again. Her kits clustered around her, small and soaked and miserable.

Huntheart padded over to Galestar's side, his brow furrowed with concern. "Could we take some time to rest, Galestar? The kits are so tired, and Fernwhisper is pawsore. I think the whole *Clan* is."

Gazing around at her bedraggled Clanmates, Galestar saw at once that Huntheart was right. *He'd make a good deputy,* she thought morosely. She'd been missing Pebblenose more and more lately. Especially when Tinyclaw seemed to agree so quickly with everything that Stripestar suggested.

"We'll stay here a while," she announced, loud enough for all of StormClan to hear. "Every cat, catch your breath. Gather your strength. Then we'll send out a hunting patrol to find some fresh-kill."

Stripestar didn't contradict her. But as the cats gratefully settled down in the damp grass, she couldn't help but sense his disapproval—as if she should have asked his permission first. She snorted crossly, then scolded herself for it. After all, Stripestar hadn't actually objected out loud.

Her mate came to lie down next to her, not quite brushing his fur against hers. "Perhaps, while we rest, we should discuss where we're heading?" Stripestar suggested. He spoke carefully, like a fussy eater picking little bones out of a mouse carcass.

Galestar's neck fur bristled. "Again?" she snapped, not bothering to hide her irritation.

Stripestar made no reply. An uneasy silence stretched between the two leaders.

We never used to argue like this, did we? thought Galestar sadly. But what else was she supposed to do? It had taken all her strength to lift Stripestar's spirits after the disappointment of the Twoleg den, not to mention lead the Clan at the same time. And now, every time she suggested a new direction to head in, Stripestar found some reason to disagree with her.

"We're going nowhere," she meowed, voicing her thoughts at last. "And we've got no idea where to try next. So I say we give up this fruitless search. I say we travel back to the one place where we *know* we can make a home."

Stripestar's eyes widened with alarm. "What do you mean?"

"The mountains, of course," Galestar told him. "There's prey there, and fresh water. The Tribe has made it their home for generations."

"But . . . *exactly*," stammered Stripestar. "That territory belongs to them! Or did you think we could simply join the Tribe? One or two cats, perhaps, but our whole *Clan*?"

Stripestar was gabbling, and Galestar was taken aback by how oddly panicked he seemed. What was so bad about the mountains? Or was it just that *she* had suggested it?

"Besides," Stripestar went on, "think of Rosebush. I can't go back there. Not where I saw one of my best Clanmates die."

Galestar huffed out a sigh of exasperation. "I'm sorry about what happened to Rosebush. Really, I am. But then where—"

"I agree with Stripestar."

Whirling round, Galestar saw that Tinyclaw had appeared on her other side. Her heart sank, as it so often did when the big, earnest she-cat showed her face. *Of course you agree with Stripestar,* she thought bitterly.

"The Tribe cats are *used* to the mountains," Tinyclaw explained. "They don't mind all those hard, spiky rocks, and the steep drops, and the hot sunshine. But we're forest cats."

Galestar clamped her jaw shut before she could give a reply she might regret. The truth was, she wanted to yowl up at the sky with frustration. Tinyclaw had never forgotten that she was *ThunderClan's* deputy.

And Stripestar has never forgotten that he was ThunderClan's leader.

Once again, she found herself longing for the calm, wise voice of Pebblenose backing her up and helping to explain her thinking. As it was, she felt as though she was always being outvoted. As though her voice didn't matter.

"Fine," she spat at last. "We won't go back to the mountains."

While Tinyclaw slunk away, Galestar could almost see Stripestar's shoulders loosening with relief. She had the strange realization that, for some reason, he *really* didn't want to go to the mountains. It was curious. But she was tired of trying to pry out information that he wouldn't give up willingly.

"At least not for now," she added when she was certain that Tinyclaw was gone.

Stripestar stiffened again, but she ignored it.

"We can't go on like this, Stripestar," she purred, trying for a gentler tone. "We both know it. So promise me this. If we fail again—if we still can't find a home within the next quarter moon—promise me that you'll reconsider."

Stripestar looked uncomfortable. With his head hung low, his flattened ears, and his tabby pelt dark brown and damp from the rain, he looked like another cat entirely from the tom with big dreams that Galestar remembered meeting at that Gathering so long ago. Her heart ached a little at the memory.

At last, her mate gave a nod. "Very well," he muttered. "I promise."

But he didn't meet her gaze.

The hunting party returned with a few large shrews and, to every cat's surprise and delight, a pair of pheasants. As they ate, the rain let up and the sky brightened. And when Galestar insisted that they leave the Thunderpath behind them, the spirits of her Clanmates seemed to lift even higher

Well rested and with full bellies, StormClan struck out once again. Slowly, the horrible roar of the monsters receded as they crossed rolling fields, and their pelts began to dry at last. Galestar felt almost hopeful. But still worry dogged her, niggling like a thorn in her paw, as they pressed on through the afternoon. There was no sign of a forest, or a Twolegplace, or anything that might offer shelter for the night.

The afternoon slid into dusk. The sky darkened and a chill wind whipped at them. They were going slower and slower,

held up by the elders and by the young kits, who had never walked so far in their short lives. Even the warriors were exhausted. And the more tired they became, the more anxious muttering spread among the Clan.

Galestar could barely see more than a few fox-lengths in front of her by the time they reached a sparse, sprawling stretch of woodland, draped in shadow.

"Here?" Stripestar wondered out loud. "Should we stop here for the night?"

He didn't sound enthusiastic about it. And for once, Galestar couldn't blame him.

The trees grew far apart, small and stunted, with mostly bare branches, and the ground between their trunks was soft and muddy, half sunk in water, with clumps of long grass swaying here and there in the night breeze. All in all, it reminded Galestar of ShadowClan territory. Yet it was somehow even less inviting.

Galestar wrinkled her nose at the stench of stagnant marsh water tinged with crow-food and some other strange, unpleasant smells that she couldn't identify and didn't want to. *What a miserable place to make camp,* she thought. But night was falling fast. And the idea of pressing on, weary as they all were, made her heart sink.

"It'll do," Galestar sighed.

She and Stripestar turned back to address the Clan. "This is where we'll sleep," Galestar announced, trying to sound cheerful about it. "There's some cover from the trees. And it will be easy to defend, if need be."

"Because no other creature would be so bee-brained as to set paw here," grumbled Tumbletail, just loud enough to be heard.

Galestar shot Stripestar a glance. But her mate looked too glassy-eyed with tiredness to scold his Clanmate. *My Clanmate too,* Galestar reminded herself. Why did it still not feel like that, after all this time?

"I can smell frogs," Galestar continued, pretending she hadn't heard Tumbletail's complaint. "So we can eat those, if there's nothing else to be found. Go, StormClan. Make your nests."

As the Clan scattered, hunting for bracken or anything dry enough to make a nest with, Galestar noticed the trio of young kits huddling close to their parents. They looked fearful, their big, round eyes darting all around, as though they expected some terrible owl to come swooping down and carry them off at any moment.

"It's safe here," Huntheart murmured, nuzzling the kits. "We promise." He sounded doubtful, though.

"Besides, it's just for one night," added Fernwhisper.

But the kits only seemed to shrink even further into themselves.

Galestar padded over. "Listen," she mewed, lying down so she was nose-to-nose with the little ones. "This place is different from the Twoleg den, isn't it? It will be an adventure staying here. But can I tell you a secret?"

The kits looked nervous. But at last Windkit gave a little nod.

Galestar glanced around, opening her eyes wide. Then she leaned in close. "The secret is, it's not the camp that's important," she whispered. "It's the Clan. Look around! Do you see how many warriors we have? And they're all big and strong and brave, just like your mother and father. Now, tell me: What scary predator would dare try to attack such a Clan?"

As soon as the words had left her mouth, she remembered what had happened at the kits' first home—how the Twolegs had driven off the whole of StormClan. *Mouse-brain!* she cursed herself inwardly. It was just like Fawnpelt's kits, all over again. *I've only made things worse.*

But to her relief, Rainkit sat up a little straighter, her eyes gleaming. Then her brothers brightened too.

"No predator would dare!" exclaimed Lightningkit.

"StormClan would chase them off!" added Windkit. "They'd run away! With their tails between their legs!"

Galestar sat up, giving Fernwhisper a gracious nod as the she-cat's eyes shone with gratitude.

It was only once the happy family had turned away, heading off to make their nests, that Galestar allowed her shoulders to slump. It was only then that she allowed herself to feel the emotions that bubbled up from deep inside every time she looked at the kits.

The pain. The envy. And, most of all, the grief.

In pale morning sunshine, Galestar picked her way across the marsh. She was doing her best to hop between the few clumps of dry grass, but it was hopeless. Her paws were already cold

and wet and heavy with mud. Even the air was damp and chilly.

Everything's wet . . . and yet there's nothing to drink!

Still, when she arrived back among the makeshift nests and dens of StormClan's camp, she found Stripestar leaning forward to lap murky marsh water from a muddy hollow. Just the sight of it turned Galestar's stomach.

"I don't know how you can drink that filth," she grumbled.

Stripestar looked up, muzzle dripping. "It's not so bad."

"It's revolting, and you know it!"

Stripestar's neck fur bristled. "Maybe." He shrugged. "But what else is there?"

Galestar wanted to howl with frustration. Couldn't he see how unhappy the Clan was here in this dingy, horrible swamp?

The few cats who had roused themselves were still lying slumped around the camp, with barely the energy to raise their heads. Three days had passed, and every cat was sick of the taste of frog. Most of them had given up on drinking the foul marsh water entirely. Instead they'd been reduced to lapping raindrops from the leaves of the few unhealthy-looking trees that clung on among the bogs. Galestar had been out wandering since dawn, trying to slake her thirst. *And what if it stops raining?* she thought.

Luckily, there seemed little chance of that. The thin drizzle had hardly let up since StormClan had made camp here. It speckled the marsh and pricked at her pelt.

"Do you think it's time to move on yet?" Galestar mewed hopefully.

Stripestar cocked his head, considering. "I think the Clan needs to rest. Didn't you think that too?"

Galestar gritted her teeth. Couldn't he agree with *anything* that she suggested? "I did," she purred, trying very hard to keep the irritation out of her voice. "And I still do. I'm just not sure that any cat is getting proper rest here. It's cold and damp. There's not enough prey or drinking water . . . and that *smell*!"

Grudgingly, Stripestar nodded. Apparently even he couldn't deny that the stench was appalling. At first Galestar had imagined that they might get used to it. But instead it had somehow seemed to get worse the longer they spent here. It clung to her pelt, prickled at her nostrils, and made her head feel light and achy.

"I've hardly slept since we got here," Galestar went on. "And the bugs!" With a growl, she twisted and lashed her tail, trying to swat away something itching at her hindquarters. "My pelt's crawling! So many ticks and flies and . . . I don't even *want* to know what else."

With a loud sigh, Stripestar sat up straight. "All right, you've made your point," he muttered. "Let's send out a hunting patrol. Every cat will feel better with some good fresh-kill in their bellies."

Galestar was too tired to argue any more. "Fine," she meowed. "I suppose it's worth a try."

"Tumbletail!" Stripestar yowled. "Frecklepelt! Alderbranch! Over here."

ThunderClan cats. Of course.

The three warriors were lying nearby, murmuring in low voices to each other. At Stripestar's call, they rose and came padding over.

Galestar had only just begun to calm down. But now she could feel her hackles rising again.

"I want you to go out hunting," Stripestar ordered. "You're three of the best warriors in StormClan, and—"

Galestar let out an angry snort.

All four cats turned to look at her. "Is something the matter?" Stripestar asked innocently.

"Yes, actually," Galestar snapped before she could stop herself. "There are *many* great warriors in StormClan. And not every single one of them comes from ThunderClan!"

Stripestar blinked, as though taken completely by surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you *always* choose ThunderClan cats! Every time. What's wrong with the warriors of WindClan?"

Without meaning to, Galestar realized that she had raised her voice. Other cats began to appear out of nowhere, drawing closer. A small circle formed around her and Stripestar as their Clanmates listened, wide-eyed and anxious to see their leaders standing off against one another.

Galestar's stomach trickled with guilt. But at the same time, it felt so *good* to have spoken it out loud at last.

Stripestar tensed. For a moment Galestar thought he might hiss and snarl back at her. But instead he closed his eyes and dipped his head. And when he finally looked up and spoke, his voice was calm. "You're absolutely right," he told her. "There

are great warriors from WindClan. And besides, we are all StormClan cats now." He was speaking not just to Galestar, but to the assembled cats too. "I'm sorry if I seem to favor my Clanmates of old. But Galestar, it's only because I have known them since I was a kit. I know their strengths. I know I can trust them."

"I thought you trusted *me*," snapped Galestar.

She sounded petulant, even to her own ears. *Like a whining kit.* How in Silverpelt had this happened? How had *Stripestar* come to act like the reasonable one?

"And I do trust you," Stripestar assured her. "Of course I do."

"Well, then. You'll allow me to organize this hunting patrol."

Stripestar dipped his head even lower, in an exaggerated display of submission. "Please do."

Over her mate's shoulder, Galestar spotted Tinyclaw. The deputy's back was arched as she glared uneasily at Galestar. But it only made Galestar more determined to have her own way.

"Very well." She turned to address the Clan. Most of them had gathered now, drawn by the spat between their leaders, and once again Galestar felt a horrible pang of guilt. *We shouldn't have let this go so far,* she realized. *And certainly not in front of the whole Clan.* But it was too late for regrets.

"I will lead the patrol," Galestar declared, loud enough for every cat to hear. "We'll go beyond this wretched swamp. And we'll bring back some good fresh-kill—real, proper fresh-kill!

No frogs! No toads! No rats! The kind of prey we used to eat back in the forest!"

A ragged cheer rose up from the assembled cats. And Galestar was even starting to feel a little better herself, until Stripestar leaned in, looking anxious again.

"Are you sure about this?" he whispered in her ear. "We don't know how big the marsh is. It could take you all day to get out of it! And even then, you might . . ." He faltered and stopped, silenced by Galestar's glare. "I mean . . . you know what you're doing," he added hastily. "I know you do. I trust you."

"How generous," Galestar ground out. "And I trust you too, of course."

"Are we coming with you, then?"

It was the black tom Tumbletail who spoke. He didn't sound very enthusiastic about the idea. Then again, Galestar wasn't very enthusiastic about it either. "No, thank you," she replied, without looking at him. "I'll take Mudsplash and Harewhisker."

WindClan cats.

Stripestar shot her a look. But if he considered complaining to her in her current state, he seemed to think better of it. And for that she was grateful.

Mud squelched beneath Galestar's paws, so cold and clammy it made her shudder with disgust.

They went in single file, Mudsplash and Harewhisker following as Galestar wove between the trees, which grew closer

together the farther they went from the camp. The canopy was dense, dark, and shadowy here. At least it offered some shelter from the haze of rain, and the ground had finally stopped giving way beneath each step. Although Galestar wasn't sure if she liked this sticky, dark muck any better.

Stripestar can't possibly be happy with this place, she thought, not for the first time. He was surely only *pretending* to be all right with it, just to avoid going to the mountains. What was it about that territory that he was so afraid of?

Galestar sighed. She and Stripestar had argued before this morning, of course—but never quite so angrily. *We need time to cool off,* she thought. *It's this horrible swamp. We need to get away from here.*

Lifting her nose, she scented the air once more. It almost made her gag. There was no hope of picking out anything here through the suffocating stink of the marsh water. There could be prey sitting right next to them and Galestar wouldn't be able to scent it.

She stopped, listening instead. *Nothing.* Not a rustle of the bushes, not a creak of a branch . . .

Galestar held her breath. She really *couldn't* hear anything—not even behind her.

"Mudsplash? Harewhisker?"

When she turned, she was surprised to see how far behind they were. Mudsplash's dark brown pelt was hard to spot in the dingy woodland, and Galestar couldn't make him out. But she could see Harewhisker easily enough, a couple of fox-lengths away, his pelt white and gray among the shadows. He

was moving oddly, Galestar noticed. Lurching and swaying, as though he was half-asleep.

"Harewhisker!" Galestar called.

The tom didn't reply. Then, with a jolt of her heart, Galestar saw him slump down suddenly into the mud.

She took off, running as fast as the freezing, sucking mud would allow. By the time she reached the fallen warrior, she was panting hard. Harewhisker's eyes were half-open. His flanks heaved in and out, and his breaths came short and frequent.

"What's wrong?" she asked. But if Harewhisker heard, he didn't answer.

"I don't . . . feel so . . . good . . ."

Glancing up, Galestar got a second shock. Mudsplash was staggering toward her, his eyes glazed. He looked unsteady on his paws. "I . . . ," he croaked. "I don't know what . . ."

Then he dropped beside Harewhisker, sprawling in the mud.

Galestar could only stare in horror as Mudsplash convulsed, shudders passing through his body. With an ugly retching noise, he coughed up a thin stream of green phlegm and vomit that soaked fast into the soft ground. Then he lay there, half-awake like his fellow tom and breathing with difficulty.

Her own stomach was turning over, but Galestar fought down her nausea. *My Clanmates need me.* "Wait here," she told them. "I'll be back with Goldenleaf and Stoneflower. I promise."

Then she was away, bounding as fast as she could through the dark woods, her heart pounding in her chest.

* * *

The medicine cats had built a temporary shelter out of a few fallen branches, which they'd covered with weeds and ferns to keep off the damp drizzle. They'd been in there for most of the afternoon already, tending to Mudsplash and Harewhisker. Still, no cat had emerged.

Galestar lay just outside the little shelter, staring into space and waiting as patiently as she could manage. It had taken all her strength to help carry the two toms back to the camp, even with the help of Stripestar and a few of the strongest warriors of StormClan.

No cat had gone anywhere. They were all here now, gathered in a little clearing and awaiting news of the two sick cats. Most of them lay motionless, still recovering after the exertion of the rescue. But some prowled in circles, too anxious to rest.

Galestar cast a glance at Stripestar, sitting a little way apart and scratching himself with a hind leg. To his credit, the tom had done all he could to help. But he'd barely looked at Galestar the whole time. *I suppose he's still angry,* she thought glumly. Then again, so was she.

Branches rustled, and the medicine cats emerged at last.

Galestar swallowed down a flutter of anxiety as she sprang up to greet them. "How are they doing?" she asked. "Will they live?"

"They'll live," Goldenleaf confirmed.

Galestar's heart leaped with relief. But the medicine cats still seemed strangely gloomy.

"They need to sleep for a while," Stoneflower explained. "Get their strength back."

"I don't understand. What happened to them?" asked Stripestar, coming over.

The medicine cats exchanged a glance. "We think they . . . ate something bad," offered Goldenleaf.

"Spotnose told us that she saw them sharing a big, bloated toad this morning," added Stoneflower. "We think that was what poisoned them."

Goldenleaf sighed. "It feels as though everything in this territory is rotten. We're rushed off our paws as it is, tending to insect bites and shivers and small wounds that fester in the damp."

"It's not up to us, of course," Stoneflower mewed cautiously. "But this place . . . it's no good. If we stay here, more cats will get sick, one way or another."

Galestar tried not to let the rush of triumph show as she looked at Stripestar. *Maybe he'll listen to a ThunderClan medicine cat, if not me?* But her mate simply frowned. "It can't really be that bad, can it?" he asked stubbornly.

Stoneflower shrugged. "We don't have the same herbs here as back in the forest," he explained. "We're not sure how to treat this illness with what we can find here."

"You'll learn," Stripestar told him. "Give it a few more days and—"

Galestar cleared her throat. "Stripestar. A word?"

Reluctantly, Stripestar allowed her to lead him away from their Clanmates. They settled down beside a stagnant pond,

and Galestar took a deep breath, wondering how she could possibly make her mate see what was right before his eyes.

"Listen, Stripestar," she murmured at last. "We've given this a try. We've stayed here much longer than we originally planned. And I wish it had worked out. Really, I do. But this has gone on long enough."

"What has?" asked Stripestar.

Is he mouse-brained? Galestar took a deep breath and tried again. "This camp isn't safe for us," she told him, trying to keep her tone as calm and reasonable as she could. "We can't stay here. We need to leave. Now. Before sundown."

"You mean, give up? Just like that?" Stripestar scowled. "I'm trying to make the best of things, Galestar! Isn't that what you're always doing? We've only been here three days, and already you want to—"

"Three days was more than enough!"

Galestar's voice had risen, but she couldn't help that. Once again, she felt the eyes of her Clanmates on her and Stripestar. They were listening in, even if they were pretending not to. But right now she didn't care. She couldn't let Stripestar have his way. Not this time.

"It's over, Stripestar," she went on. "There is no home for us here."

"I think I know what you're really saying," Stripestar replied. He spoke slowly, and with great control, as though it was all he could do not to yowl with rage. "You want us to go back to the mountains. But I've already told you, they're not right for StormClan. We can't—"

"That's *not* what I'm saying!" Galestar interrupted. "Stars above, right now I don't care if it's the mountains, or the forest, or even a fast-flowing river . . . just so long as it's *not here*!" She glared at him, her neck fur bristling in spite of herself. "But listen. Since you mention it, what *is* so terrible about the mountains? Why are you so determined that we'll never set paw there again?"

"I . . . That's not . . . It's only . . . ," Stripestar stammered. Then he threw back his head and let out a ragged howl of fury and frustration. Every cat in the camp must have heard it, and Galestar could sense her Clanmates flinching with shock. Not her, though. She was too angry for that.

"Go on," she insisted. "Tell me why. Why are you—"

"Let it go!" snarled Stripestar, spitting and arching his back. "Why can't you just . . . let it *go*?"

"Perhaps I can help?" Tinyclaw came scurrying over, her whiskers twitching, her big yellow eyes wide with alarm.

"I doubt it," snapped Galestar. She didn't spare Tinyclaw a glance. Instead she squared up to Stripestar, nose to nose, meeting his glare with her own.

"Please!" Tinyclaw yowled, and Galestar realized with a jolt that she'd never heard the deputy sound quite so anxious before. "Stop fighting, both of you. Stripestar, you're scaring our Clan!"

"*Your* Clan?" growled Galestar. "What's that supposed to mean? Stripestar and I are leaders. Equal, joint leaders."

"That's not what I meant," Tinyclaw whimpered desperately.

"But it's how you've been acting." Galestar rounded on the

she-cat. "You two are always trying to shout me down. This isn't the way it was supposed to be! This isn't why I left the forest! My home! My *sister*!"

Tinyclaw didn't argue back. She only cringed and hung her head.

Galestar felt suddenly weary. All the fight leaked out of her at once, and she let her shoulders slump. Stripestar sank back on his haunches too, looking just as exhausted as she felt.

The three cats sat there in silence, not looking at each other, not breathing a word. They had spoken enough already.

Galestar felt hollowed out—numb and tired and empty. *This has all been a mistake,* she thought sadly. *Right from the beginning. All of it.* Now there was only one question left, and she couldn't even begin to answer it.

Where do we go from here?

Chapter 16

Stripestar drove a claw into the soft, rotten wood of the branch. Gloomily he watched the little line of ants divert, flowing easily around his paw as though it were a rock tossed into the middle of a stream. He almost envied them. *Ants always know what to do,* he thought. *They don't have to worry about mysterious prophecies. Or a Clan that needs looking after. Or a furious mate who won't speak to them.*

Two days had passed since Harewhisker and Mudsplash had fallen ill and Galestar had confronted him about their camp. Since then, Stripestar had done his best to avoid her—which wasn't difficult, since she seemed to be doing the same. They slept in the same nest but rolled away from each other, and barely a word passed between them from sunrise to sunset.

Not long ago, Stripestar had told Tinyclaw that he was going to the dirtplace. But after relieving himself, he hadn't felt like returning to the camp. So here he was, perched on a low branch of one of the few twisting old trees that had somehow managed to grow in the thick, sticky mud. Alone with his thoughts.

I should probably go back, he reminded himself. *Before they start to worry about me.* But he didn't move.

The worst thing was that Galestar was right. The camp *was* awful. Even though Mudsplash and Harewhisker were recovering, which had made every cat feel a little better, the marsh remained a blighted, depressing place. And even though the rains had finally passed, a damp fog still hung in the air, allowing nothing to dry out.

Stripestar would never have admitted it out loud, but he was just as sick of the cold and the frogs and the bugs that had infested their pelts as the rest of them were.

Once or twice, he had even considered confessing to Galestar that he agreed with her. It would feel so good to be on the same side again. To be fighting *with* her, instead of *against* her.

But then, of course, she would insist that they set off for the mountains.

Stripestar let out a long, weary sigh. How could he explain it to her? That he was absolutely certain it was the wrong choice? There was one way, of course. He could tell her about the dream. The one he had kept from her for so many moons now. The gull. The mountain peaks. The fish with legs. Since they'd left the Twoleg den, the dream had returned to haunt his thoughts. It had been a bad *omen*—he was sure of that. A warning of what might happen in that high-up place.

But he couldn't tell Galestar any of that, because the last thing he needed was for her to start doubting StormClan's future again.

Pulling his claw out of the branch, Stripestar paused. He was almost sure he'd heard a sound wafting toward him on the breeze. A sound that set his fur bristling. Was it the yowl of a cat?

He froze, listening hard. There it was again. Not one yowl, but many.

All coming from the direction of StormClan's camp.

Stripestar leaped down, landing on all four paws in the mud. He could hear it clearly now—the shrieks of his Clanmates all mingling into one. Heart pounding, he hared off through the fog, running as fast as the soft, squelching ground would allow him.

He was panting and light-headed by the time he arrived. The fog seemed thicker here, but he could make out the shadowy shapes of cats bolting every which way through the camp. "What's going on?" he demanded. But his Clanmates were too panic-stricken to reply.

Then Stripestar saw, and his blood froze.

In the middle of the camp, a strange, unearthly creature had come crashing through the nursery that StormClan had built out of long grass and ferns. It snapped wildly at Wasppaw, who yelped and wailed as she darted away. It swung its head left and right, uncertain which cat to lunge at next.

Stripestar's mouth went dry as he stared, trying to understand what he was looking at. He had never seen such an odd animal. It seemed almost like a stoat. But it was larger, covered in bristling dark hair, and with a long, sinuous neck that swayed like a snake's. Its claws were stubby, large, and vicious,

its head blunt and savage, with small dark eyes like wet pebbles and a mouth full of sharp white teeth that gnashed hungrily at the air.

What in all Silverpelt?

"We have to drive it off!" Turning, Stripestar's heart jumped to see that Galestar had arrived at his side, eyes wide, flanks heaving as she panted. "Are you with me?"

"I'm with you." He glanced over his shoulder at Tinyclaw. His deputy looked back at him with wide eyes, her flanks heaving in panic. "Keep every cat close, and stay alert—there might be more of these brutes looking to attack!"

Tinyclaw nodded, turning to begin gathering the StormClan cats to her. Then, together, Stripestar and Galestar prowled forward, snarling, muscles taut and ready to pounce.

The creature fixed its beady eyes on them. It let out a searing, high-pitched shriek, then started forward, scurrying fast and trailing a long, thick, furry tail in the mud behind it.

Galestar hissed and leaped, claws slicing the air.

The blow didn't connect. But as Galestar landed, the beast reared back, startled. Its horribly flexible body coiled, and it stomped its claws furiously into the mud, spattering Stripestar with marsh water. It glared suspiciously at the cats, its gaze darting swiftly from one to the other.

Stripestar circled around to one side. Galestar was already on the move, instinctively taking the opposite position.

With another piercing shriek, the beast whirled on Stripestar, swiping a huge, dark paw. As he pulled back, Stripestar felt a gust of displaced air ruffling his whiskers. Then he

danced in, clawing lightning-fast, his claw-tips catching and raking the beast's hideous muzzle.

Hot blood sprayed and spotted Stripestar's face. He screamed out a wild cry as the joy of battle surged through his veins. "StormClaaaaaaan!"

The word was hardly out of his mouth before he had to dodge again. The beast's other paw came whipping out, almost smacking into his skull. Stripestar staggered in the mud, barely keeping his balance. *That was too close!*

The creature leered, showing off its glittering white teeth. It let out a horrible sound that might have begun as a snarl but turned into a yelp of agony as Galestar pounced and dug her claws in deep, tearing a chunk of flesh from its flank.

Blood streaming, the beast reeled. For one glorious moment, Stripestar thought it would slump down dead. But instead it whirled around impossibly fast and snatched Galestar up in its claws.

Galestar let out a horrendous wail. She jerked. She flailed her forepaws, trying to twist to strike back. But she couldn't reach.

No!

Heart thundering in his ears, Stripestar charged. He used none of his warrior moves. He simply hurled himself at the brutish creature without a thought, clawing and slashing and spitting for all he was worth.

The creature bellowed. It stumbled, thrown off balance. Out of the corner of his eye, Stripestar saw his mate go tumbling, splattering into a shallow pool of marsh water. But there

was no time to celebrate. Pressing the advantage, he lowered his head and slammed it into the intruder's rump as hard as he could, knocking it sprawling and rolling through the mud.

Stripestar ran to Galestar without sparing their enemy a second glance. "Are you all right?" He heaved at her, nudging her out of the water until she could stand, swaying on unsteady legs.

"I'm fine . . . ," she gasped. They leaned in close, propping each other up as they fought to catch their breath. Stripestar's muscles burned, his claws sang, and his fur was matted, heavy with mud and marsh water and blood. *But we're alive. We're both alive.*

Then Galestar's eyes went wide with panic as she spotted something over Stripestar's shoulder. "Oh, by the stars, no!" she yelped.

Turning, Stripestar saw that the beast was back on its paws, dripping with wet mud. It was stalking, but not toward them.

Mudsplash! Harewhisker!

The Clan had scattered, trying to fight off the intruder and herd the apprentices and kits away. In the confusion, the sick cats lay abandoned beneath the medicine cats' canopy. Unable to escape. Unable to defend themselves. And now the monstrous creature was heading straight for them.

Stripestar lurched forward, paws slamming into the mud as he drove himself toward the shelter. They had to intercept the beast before it could maul the vulnerable warriors. Galestar kept pace at his side, eyes wild, breathing hard.

The beast sped up as though it had sensed them on its tail.

It broke into a lope, then a run, its body undulating like a snake.

We're not going to make it. The realization hit Stripestar like a bolt of lightning. He saw Mudsplash stir and open his eyes a little—just enough to see the nightmarish creature bearing down on him. He opened his mouth to yowl . . . but the yowl never came. The fiend was already on him, jaws clamping tight around the cat's neck.

The sound that emerged from Mudsplash was like nothing Stripestar had ever heard before—a weak, gurgling rattle that chilled him to the bone. The warrior's eyes rolled up in his head. Blood soaked his pelt. Galestar rammed the beast headfirst and made it stumble. But its teeth must have sunk too deep to be dislodged, because it dragged Mudsplash's juddering body along with it, his tail trailing in the mud.

With a furious roar, Stripestar struck, slicing and gouging at the beast's tough hide until his claws were throbbing and wet with blood. At his side, Galestar savaged the intruder with ferocious bites, tearing chunks of flesh and fur and spitting them free.

Stripestar was panting, his muscles burning. It seemed an age before the beast dropped Mudsplash like a chewed-up carcass and ducked away, hissing with pain as it rounded on Stripestar and Galestar, breathing hard. Its dark eyes glittered with rage. In between them lay the broken body of Mudsplash, a ragged heap of fur and blood. Stripestar couldn't tell if he was alive or dead. And there was no time to find out.

Quick as an adder, the beast darted at Mudsplash, trying

to reclaim its prize. But Stripestar was faster. Leaping in, he swung his claws in a wide arc and raked every single one across the creature's face. Blood showered the ground like rain. The beast howled in agony. It pulled back at once, pawing helplessly at its ruined face.

It can't see anything! Stripestar realized, with a fierce rush of triumph.

"Kill it!" screeched Galestar. "Kill it now!" Wild with rage, she fell on the creature, swiping and kicking and driving it back. This time, it didn't try to fight—just lurched and swayed and staggered in retreat, its paws sinking as it fled straight into the shallows of a pool of swampy water.

Bunching his hind legs, Stripestar pounced and landed hard on the beast's back. He forced it down with his sheer weight, claws latching deep into its flanks, clinging grimly on. The beast's shoulders rolled weakly in a vain attempt to shake him off.

"Galestar!" Stripestar yelled. "The water!"

She seemed to understand at once. Scrambling astride the creature's head, Galestar drove its face down into the murky swamp. Bubbles frothed at the surface. The beast began to writhe in desperation. But its strength was fading. Stripestar could feel it. And his own muscles were tight with an energy born of fury.

This is for Mudsplash, he thought, as the creature squirmed helplessly beneath them. *This is for StormClan.*

He held on, his heart thundering in his chest. And it was only when Galestar lifted her forepaws at last and clambered

slowly back onto dry land that he realized that the bubbles had ceased and the beast had gone limp.

Stripestar retracted his claws. Trembling, he joined his mate on the bank. Then together they watched in silence as the body of the strange creature slumped, slid down into the water, and floated there.

It was dead. As lifeless as a drifting branch.

At length the two of them padded back to the camp, limbs heavy, heads hung low. Here and there, cats were beginning to emerge cautiously from hiding places. They joined their leaders, following Stripestar and Galestar as they made their way across the ruined camp and the churned-up ground to where Mudsplash lay in a pool of blood.

A circle of cats had gathered there already, looking down in shock at the fallen warrior. They didn't look like they had been saved from deadly danger. They looked shaken. They looked horrified.

Stripestar saw that Mudsplash was stirring, shifting weakly as the medicine cats tried to staunch the bleeding. "He's alive," muttered Stoneflower. "At least for now."

We did it, Stripestar told himself. *We protected our Clan.*

But it brought him no comfort.

Chapter 17

"We're moving on," Galestar announced, as soon as StormClan was all assembled. "We're moving on *now.*" She didn't know what she would have done if Stripestar had tried to argue. But to her relief he just gave a grim nod of agreement.

Finally!

Galestar felt a shudder of anger that it had taken such a horror to make Stripestar see sense. But there was no denying it—no cat felt safe here anymore, no matter how stubborn they were. Not after that hideous weasel-beast had come creeping up through the fog and shown them all how poor a camp they had made. Galestar had only settled for it in the first place because she'd thought it would be easy to defend. *Now every cat can see how wrong I was.*

They left the camp without a backward glance. She and Stripestar led the way, forging on through the thick fog in search of higher ground, with their Clanmates following at their tails. It was slow going. Mudsplash could hardly walk and had to be supported at every step by Hazelfrond on one side and Icefoot on the other. Harewhisker, not fully recovered from his illness, had to stop every few fox-lengths to catch his breath.

All the while, Galestar felt as jittery as a squirrel, nearly jumping out of her skin at every creak of a branch and oddly shaped bush that loomed out of the mist. But she forced herself to walk tall and proud. *The Clan needs us. It needs both its leaders.*

After a painfully slow journey, they reached a low hillock that rose above the fog like an island in a gray, misty sea. The ground was drier and firmer, to most cats' relief, with reeds growing all around the summit.

"What do you think?" asked Stripestar hopefully as they reached the top.

I think it stinks, thought Galestar, only just managing to hold her tongue. *We're still in the middle of the marshes!* If it weren't for the weather, they would probably still be able to see their previous camp. Just when she'd thought they might finally have a chance to escape the desolate marshland for good, it seemed they were stuck here once again. Perhaps they were stuck here forever.

"I think it'll have to do," she told Stripestar briskly.

If Stripestar noticed her irritation, he didn't respond to it. And while he went off to pick out guards, and sent them to keep watch on all sides, Galestar padded over to check on Harewhisker and Mudsplash. Mudsplash had barely been able to walk that morning. Now both warriors had collapsed. The medicine cats were bustling around them, trying to make them as comfortable as possible.

"How are you feeling?" asked Galestar gently, settling down next to Mudsplash.

Her Clanmate lay on his side, wheezing, the breaths coming fast and shallow. His eyes were filmy, focusing on her clearly one moment, then staring off into nothingness. "Never . . . better . . . ," he rasped. Then he gurgled out a cough, as though the effort to speak had cost him dearly.

A lump formed in Galestar's throat. She couldn't bear to see the ragged wound in Mudsplash's neck, the dark blood that had soaked and clotted the meager poultice that Goldenleaf had tied on.

It didn't look good.

Out of nowhere she recalled a morning long ago, when she and Mudsplash had snuck off as young apprentices to play with pinecones in a sunlit clearing before grumpy old Squirrelbrush dragged them both back to camp by their ears. They hadn't spent much time together in those days—Mudsplash had always been a quiet, serious cat, even when he was young. But sometimes around Galestar his eyes had sparkled, and his playful side had come out.

She had always wanted to get to know him better.

Galestar choked back the sadness that suddenly welled up inside her. "You're going to be all right," she promised Mudsplash, wishing that she believed it. "Goldenleaf! Can't you give him anything more for the pain?"

"I wish I could." Goldenleaf shook her head gravely. "That beast crushed half our supplies when it came rampaging through our den. And we haven't been able to find anything useful in these foul marshes. At least, nothing we recognize."

"It's like we told you," muttered Stoneflower. "This place is no good."

"Take it up with Stripestar," Galestar shot back, before immediately regretting it. She took a deep breath, calming herself. "Never mind. Do what you can."

She had never felt more useless.

As she watched the medicine cats pawing through the few herbs they had managed to bring with them, she thought of Kestrelwing, with another pang of grief. She'd never met a wiser medicine cat. Goldenleaf and Stoneflower seemed completely at a loss in this unknown environment. But perhaps Kestrelwing, with all his experience and wisdom, would have known what to do. Perhaps he would have had some knowledge of marsh herbs—enough to cure Harewhisker's sickness and help Mudsplash's wound to heal.

What if he hadn't died on the Thunderpath?

And what if Rosebush hadn't fallen to his death?

What if they hadn't come to these marshes?

What if they had never formed StormClan in the first place . . . ?

So many questions, with so few answers. And what good was it to dwell on them now?

"Tinyclaw." Galestar gestured with her tail, calling over the only deputy StormClan had left. "Send a patrol out to gather some herbs. As many as they can find, all different types. Anything that might help cure Harewhisker and Mudsplash. And send the best warriors we have, in case there are any more strange, dangerous creatures out there. Do you understand?"

Tinyclaw looked anxious, as she so often did. Her eyes darted around. And with a flash of rage, Galestar realized that she was looking for Stripestar. *She wants to check with him. Make sure he agrees with my plan.*

"Now!" Galestar snapped.

"Yes, of course. Right away." Flustered, Tinyclaw nodded vigorously and scurried away.

Once again, Galestar found herself missing Pebblenose. *Yet another cat that we've lost in pursuit of this dream of ours.* She wondered how he and Thrushcall were settling into life with the Tribe. Of course, there was no way of knowing. *But it can't be any harder up on the mountain than it is down here in the marsh.*

She heaved a deep sigh.

"There," she told the medicine cats. "Will that help?"

Stoneflower only shrugged.

"Maybe," Goldenleaf offered cautiously. "I suppose more herbs can't hurt, but . . ."

"But what?" growled Galestar.

"Well, they'll be useless if we can't identify them. And besides, the water around here is filthy. If Harewhisker and Mudsplash don't get enough clean drinking water, they might—"

"Enough," Galestar interrupted. "Things are bad here. I understand." She felt the weight of her decisions pressing down on her. She'd allowed them to remain in this terrible place too long, and now they couldn't leave until Mudsplash recovered. If only she'd pressed harder to leave earlier! But what was it that Stripestar had told her when she had tried

to persuade him to leave this place? "Just . . . make the best of things," she muttered feebly.

If you can.

Mudsplash was dead.

For half a moon he had lain, tossing and turning, slipping in and out of consciousness and pawing deliriously at thin air as the medicine cats tried herb after herb. Nothing had worked. The hideous wound on his neck had turned bad. The stench of it hung across the hilltop camp like a dark storm cloud, poisoning every cat's mood.

By the end, it was almost a relief when StormClan woke one morning to find him still at last. *At least he's at peace,* thought Galestar grimly.

It hardly seemed real. But as the vigil came to a close, the dawn light fell pale and cold on his curled-up body, where it lay in the center of the camp, mercilessly reminding them of the truth. *Mudsplash is with StarClan now.*

Galestar cleared her throat and looked up, gazing at the miserable cats who huddled around the Clanmate they had lost. She had hung her head all night in silent respect for Mudsplash. But now was the time to honor him with words.

"Mudsplash was my Clanmate," she purred quietly. "But he was also my friend. He was loyal and true, first to WindClan and later to StormClan. He fought beside us at Sunningrocks, and no cat was more courageous. He braved the Thunderpath. The mountains. He never doubted us. He never complained." She dipped her head, once again. "I will miss him."

It didn't feel like enough. Not *nearly* enough. But what words possibly could be?

Galestar listened to Berryfall tell of how Mudsplash had once protected her from a fox when she had hurt her leg in the forest. She heard Spotnose speak of Mudsplash's kindness to her when she had lost her first litter to greencough. At long last, all their words were spent, and there was nothing left to do but bury the fallen warrior.

As they dug, shoveling cold, damp mud that clung to their paws, Galestar felt her sorrow turn to frustration, then to anger. This foul earth couldn't even provide a safe, dry resting place for one of the best warriors StormClan had ever had! It was all she could do not to scream with fury. And when they had given Mudsplash to the ground and covered him once again, Galestar sat up straight to address the Clan.

"Enough is enough," she declared. "We have endured this wretched place for too long. How many more Clanmates will we have to lose? How many infections will go untreated? How many wounds will fester, when they could be cured if we were anywhere else?" She saw Stoneflower and Goldenleaf nodding in agreement. "I see your misery," Galestar carried on. "And I will not allow it to continue."

She shot a glance at Stripestar. He was hanging back, with Tinyclaw at his side—*of course*. Both cats looked tense, watching and listening with their fur bristling, their ears pricked with anxiety. But Galestar had thought long and hard about this, and she wasn't going to let their fear hold her back. *Not anymore.*

"We must leave this marsh," Galestar meowed. "For *good* this time. Harewhisker is back on his paws and ready to travel. The time is right." The gray-and-white warrior nodded in agreement. He looked tired, but he was almost back to his full strength.

"But where will we go?" called Fernwhisper, her kits clustering wide-eyed at her paws.

"I've been considering that." Galestar pointed with her forepaw. "Look over there—do you see it, in the distance?" Every cat turned to peer off where she was pointing. When they had first made camp here, the fog had concealed it. But the air had cleared, and now it was plain to see, rising from the horizon—a shadow against the white sky.

"It's a mountain," meowed Huntheart.

"Shaped like a fox's head." Galestar nodded. "We saw it on our journey, before we passed through the apple forest. Do you remember? We should have headed for it then. I say we go there now."

"Galestar!" Stripestar's cry was almost a yowl. Galestar was taken aback. She had expected him to argue, but he looked wild-eyed with desperation. "We've already discussed this! We agreed that—"

"No," Galestar interrupted. "We discussed going back to the Tribe's territory. That is not what I'm suggesting."

"But it's a mountain all the same, and that's—"

"And that has to be better than here," Galestar insisted. "I know that we are used to living in a forest. But we can adapt. We can change. The Tribe has proved that it's possible to make a life in the mountains. And we won't be taking their

territory—we'll have a mountain of our own. It will be our home. Our home forever."

She gazed around at her Clanmates. Some seemed convinced. Others appeared less sure or were staring at Stripestar, hoping for reassurance. Galestar stared at him too. Her mate looked trapped and frightened, as though he were cornered by badgers with no way out. *What in Silverpelt has gotten into him?*

"Give me a reason," she meowed as gently as she could. "Just one good reason why we shouldn't go to the mountain."

Stripestar hesitated. He looked as though he were about to speak, then glanced downward, wrestling with his thoughts. Part of Galestar wished they were having this conversation alone—just the two of them. *But we tried that, and it didn't work.*

At length, Stripestar slumped. He shook his head. "Very well," he grumbled. "The mountain it is."

Galestar felt like she was floating. As though a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "So it's agreed?" she asked her Clanmates. "We'll leave this place at last."

A murmur of assent spread through the Clan. They sounded relieved, mostly, but not exactly hopeful. After all, hadn't they traveled for long enough already? *Still—anywhere is better than here,* Galestar reminded herself.

"Well, then. Make ready."

As the cats moved off, preparing themselves for a journey once again, Galestar gazed at the blank white sky and offered up a prayer of hope. *Great StarClan . . . or the Tribe of Endless Hunting . . . or whatever spirits are watching over us . . . please grant us our home, at last!*

CHAPTER 18

Stripestar prowled a fox-length behind his mate, watching her every step. He studied the easy movement of her black-and-white dappled shoulders, the curve of her tail, held high, and her ears pricked up with hope as she led StormClan through a valley of long grass. On the horizon, the mountain rose closer than ever, its peak scraping at the sky.

Inside, he was boiling with anger. What right did she have? Weren't they both supposed to be leaders? And yet it was Galestar who had decided to take this path to the fox-headed mountain. Galestar who strode out in front. Galestar, and Galestar alone.

How dare she?

The ugly thoughts stung him like wasps, and he didn't trust himself to speak to her. In truth, he'd hardly shared a word with any cat in days. He was too afraid of what he might say.

Ever since they had left the marshlands, the sun had shone down, as if even the weather were showing its approval of Galestar's plan. The warmth had dried out their pelts at last, the prey ran well, and every cat was regaining some of the

plumpness, the sleekness, and the good cheer that they had enjoyed all leaf-bare in the Twoleg den.

Even Stripestar had to admit, it felt good to be walking on solid ground. His paws no longer sank into soft mud. They had left the endless damp and drizzle far behind them at last. Greenleaf was coming, and Stripestar had never felt more ready for it. *Galestar's favorite season,* he remembered with a confusing rush of affection.

She should have trusted you, he reminded himself. *We should have made this choice together.* But for the first time, he couldn't quite convince himself. And another voice answered: *But I never told her about my dream. How was she to understand?*

Maybe the dream really was nothing more than a dream after all? So many moons had passed since that night beside the mysterious pool of water . . . and perhaps it was Stonetelling's words that had gotten inside Stripestar's head and warped his thoughts. Besides, even if there were mountains to fear, who could say which mountains those were? Surely there were many in the world beyond the forest—more than any cat could count. . . .

As the sun climbed higher into the blue sky, Stripestar allowed himself to enjoy the gentle breeze that ruffled his fur, the fresh air that filled his lungs, and the pleasant scent of wildflowers that dotted the fields. And when Galestar turned to purr contentedly at him, he couldn't help but speed up, walking alongside her for the first time in a half-moon.

Their fur brushed against each other's. They weren't quite touching flanks—but nearly.

Something had changed in Galestar since they'd left the marshlands. She had softened. She had let go of her anger.

And now I must let go of mine.

Stripestar was surprised when they crested a rise and saw a Thunderpath winding through the field beyond. The sight gave him a painful pang of grief as he thought of Kestrelwing. But this ribbon of dark ground was silent and empty and so much narrower than the one on which the elder had met his death, without any of the white markings that Twolegs liked to daub on their Thunderpaths.

We're in the wilderness, he thought with satisfaction. *A place where Twolegs seldom come.* It was a good feeling. It even made him feel a little hopeful about the mountain.

"What should we do?" asked Galestar.

Stripestar looked into her clear blue eyes and his heart swelled. *She could have just given the order,* he realized. *But instead she asked for my help.*

"It's so quiet, we can cross it four at a time," he suggested. "You and I should go last. Until then, we can keep watch for monsters, one in either direction."

Galestar nodded, beaming. "It's a good plan."

Not a single monster came roaring down the Thunderpath as StormClan made the crossing. Each group ran, darting across the black ground as fast as they could. But even so the mood was cheerful, the cats happily chatting to each other as they gathered on the opposite side.

Last of all, Stripestar and Galestar dashed across.

As he came panting to a halt on the far side, Stripestar caught a whiff of something scuttling in the long grass that

grew there. Muscles tightening, he pounced and snatched up a wriggling little brown mouse. One swift snap of his jaws and it was fresh-kill. But he didn't gulp it down, even though his mouth watered and his belly rumbled.

Padding over to Fernwhisper's kits, Stripestar dropped the mouse at their paws. "Here, you three. Don't eat it all at once."

With squeals of delight, the kits dug in, pawing and ripping at the fresh-kill.

Out of the corner of his eye, Stripestar noticed Galestar sitting and watching him. She had that look about her—a look he hadn't seen in far too long. It was the look that had first made him fall in love with her so many, many moons ago.

Something loosened up inside him, like a great claw unclenching. He felt light on his paws for the first time in a long while. He gazed up at the mountain. Its rocky slopes could be seen clearly now, rough and jagged, but with patches of scraggy grass and twisting bushes. The strange second peak that formed the fox's snout jutted out among a few wisps of white cloud scudding across the sky.

It's magnificent, thought Stripestar. It wasn't far off now, either—perhaps another day's travel. *Our home.* And the dream stirred inside him once again. The dream that he'd feared might have died. Now it seemed that it had only been sleeping after all.

"Come on!" he called to the whole Clan. "Let's keep moving!"

The last time StormClan had climbed a mountain, Stripestar remembered racing up its slopes in his eagerness to reach the summit.

This time, things would be different.

Craning his neck, he peered up at the towering rock face—a forbidding mass of glowering crags and jagged ledges and precious little vegetation. It was steep—almost sheer—and the bare, rocky summit was veiled by the gray clouds that had rolled in that morning, throwing the world into shadow. It made Stripestar dizzy just to look at it, and he had to swallow back his fear at the thought of being so high up.

All morning, StormClan had been chattering happily among themselves, sharing jokes and stories of old times. But as they drew closer, the mountain had silenced them. Now, standing at the foot of it, Stripestar could tell that every cat was twitching with anxiety.

"We'll take it slowly," he promised. "And we'll leave no cat behind."

"What about Harewhisker?" murmured Tinyclaw, casting a worried look at the weak tom. Harewhisker was lying flat, resting his head on his paws and breathing hard. He had forged on bravely these last few days. But he'd spoken little and always lagged behind. Any cat could see that he hadn't yet fully recovered.

An unwelcome memory flashed through Stripestar's mind. Seasons had come and gone since they had rested on the foothills of another mountain, when Rosebush had assured him that he was fine. That there was nothing to worry about. That nothing bad would happen.

Stripestar couldn't bring himself to recall what had happened next.

"We'll support him all the way," Galestar told Tinyclaw. Her eyes met Stripestar's, full of concern, and he saw that she had guessed exactly where his mind had wandered. *She knows me so well.* The thought jolted him out of his gloom at once.

"The kits will need help, too," Stripestar added. "We'll bear them on our backs."

He strolled over to where Rainkit was huddling up close against Huntheart's pelt and lay down flat. "Should we go together, you and I?" he purred, giving Rainkit a friendly wink.

"But—but what if there are *eagles?*" Rainkit stammered. "Or—or snakes, or *Twolegs?*"

"By the stars!" Stripestar opened his eyes wide and looked all around in mock terror. "I should hope not. But if there are . . . well, perhaps you could protect me? Do you think you could manage that?"

Rainkit looked startled for a moment. Then her chest swelled with pride and her eyes gleamed with determination. "I'll do my best," she swore. "For StormClan!"

"For StormClan!" Stripestar echoed as the kit scrambled onto his back. "Yowch! Claws in, if you don't mind."

"Sorry, Stripestar." Rainkit retracted them and clung on for all she was worth.

They set off, taking it slowly, just as Stripestar had promised. He hopped from crack to crevice, hauled himself up boulders and heaved his way past scraggly thornbushes. At first, Stripestar marveled at the lightness of the little kit clinging to his shoulders. But soon he was huffing and gasping with the extra weight.

"Keep going, Stripestar," Rainkit mewed when he stopped to catch his breath. "You can do it!"

Snorting with amusement, Stripestar kept climbing.

Huntheart and Fernwhisper came behind, each carrying one of their kits. And farther back, Stripestar could see the cats of StormClan strewn out across the mountainside, some helping the elders find their way. Galestar and Tinyclaw were clambering close on each side of Harewhisker, making sure the warrior made it safely.

It warmed Stripestar's heart to see his mate and their deputy working together again at last. Back in the marshland, he'd started to feel as though they might never see eye to eye. But things had changed between them—just like they had changed between him and Galestar.

Sunhigh came and went, and still they climbed. Stripestar's limbs buzzed with tiredness, and his paws were chafed and aching from the endless hard rocks. But his heart leaped all the same. It felt so good to be doing something—to be going somewhere—not just languishing in the damp marshland, waiting for predators and sickness to pick them off one by one.

They had climbed more than halfway to the summit when Stripestar pulled himself up onto a flat stretch of rock. Looking around, he saw that it was a smooth plateau, almost as big as the hollow at Fourtrees. Relief surged through him. *Finally, a chance for a proper rest!* Gently he set Rainkit down and the two of them stretched out, panting, waiting for the rest of the Clan to catch up.

Stripestar felt a deep contentment settle across him as he took in the view. Far below, the land extended all the way to the horizon, fields and forests rolling off into a distant haze. He couldn't help but marvel again at how big the world really was. And as he watched, the sun broke through the clouds at last, sending shafts of golden light streaming across the mountainside, and warming his pelt.

It all felt so *perfect*. Like a sign from . . . *not StarClan*. But perhaps from the spirits of the cats they had lost along the way. *Rosebush. Kestrelwing. Mudsplash.*

Gradually, Stripestar became aware of a sound he hadn't noticed at first—a steady trickling and chuckling of water. Rising to his paws, he padded to the edge of the plateau. He peered around a large boulder, and his heart leaped to see a clear, sparkling stream of water there, flowing down from higher up the mountain.

"Rainkit!" he called. The little white she-cat came running, and together they lapped gratefully at the water. It tasted sweeter than strawberries in greenleaf.

Stripestar's whole body was buzzing with excitement now. Returning to the plateau, he noticed how the mountain higher up overhung part of the flat ground, providing shade and cover. *We could build dens there,* he thought. *A nursery. A shelter for the elders.* There were plants and bushes too, growing higher up. Flowers and herbs that the medicine cats could surely make use of.

He watched, his excitement only mounting, as the warriors of StormClan came scrambling up to join him and Rainkit

on the plateau. Each cat gazed around in wonder, admiring the spot.

This could be our home.

Stripestar hardly dared believe it—but didn't they deserve this, after so long? After all they had suffered? And with joy filling his heart, he allowed the dream to carry him away.

Our journey might really be over . . . at last!

Stripestar crouched, motionless, doing all he could to ignore the delicious scent of vole in his nostrils.

Every cat in the hunting patrol must have smelled it. Stripestar could tell by the way their ears were pricked, their whiskers quivering. The four of them waited among the rocks, hidden from view and utterly motionless. Ready.

There—the little creature came scurrying suddenly out from under a flat rock, pausing to nibble at something in its paws.

Palepaw tensed, trembling with the effort to suppress her instinct. Quickly, Stripestar laid his tail against the apprentice's flank, holding it there until he felt the young she-cat's muscles relax. *Not yet,* he thought. *Not yet.*

He had chosen Swiftwing and Whitestep to accompany him on this patrol—two of the calmest, most reliable hunters in all of StormClan. But Galestar had insisted they bring Palepaw, Swiftwing's apprentice, along too. *She'll be a warrior soon,* she'd pointed out. *Apprentices are the future of our Clan.* Stripestar had agreed at the time. He only hoped he wasn't about to regret that.

They waited, still and in silence, until at last, just as

Stripestar had hoped, a shadow flitted across them. He glanced up, and his heart jumped as he spotted the hawk wheeling overhead.

It has to work this time, Stripestar told himself. They'd seen the Tribe cats do this, back in the other mountains. By now a moon had passed since StormClan had made their camp on the plateau, and in all that time, they'd failed to bring down a single bird. *But today will be different. Today the Clan will feast.*

With a harsh cry, the hawk dropped.

Stripestar saw the vole freeze.

"Now!" he shrieked.

As the hawk swooped down on the vole, in a fury of flashing beak and feathers, the cats pounced. Swiftwing and Whitestep each landed firmly on a wing, claws unsheathed, pinning the hawk's feathered limbs down hard against the rocks. And as the bird began to squirm, beak snapping wildly, Palepaw and Stripestar came slamming down on its back.

A crack and a crunch of breaking bone—Stripestar felt it, beneath his paws. Then he lunged forward and bit deep. Blood filled his mouth, spilled and splashed among the rocks.

Slowly, jerking, the bird went limp. And at last Stripestar threw his head back and unleashed a joyful yowl of triumph into the clear blue sky.

"StormClaaaaaaannn!"

It took them forever to haul the fresh-kill back, bumping and dragging it across the rocks. But as they finally heaved it into camp, their Clanmates came crowding around, whooping and crowing with delight.

"A hawk! A whole hawk!"

"How did you *do* that?"

"I can't believe it!"

Palepaw looked more excited than any of them, her fur bristling, her eyes shining, and her face smeared with blood from the kill. The other apprentices flocked to her, desperate to hear all about the hunt.

Stripestar looked on, his chest swollen with pride. *That hawk will feed us for a quarter moon!* he thought. *And it's just the first. We'll catch more.*

"Welcome back, brave hunters." Turning, he saw Galestar sitting on a rock beside the nests, her blue eyes sparkling.

"Oh, it was nothing," Stripestar meowed happily.

"Modest, too!" Galestar snorted with amusement. "Will you come for a walk with me, hunter? You must be thirsty after such hard work."

Stripestar's heart sang as he followed his mate, leaping from rock to rock until they reached the pretty little stream that spilled and gurgled down the mountain, so close to their home.

"You know, I think I saw a minnow in here yesterday," murmured Galestar when they had drunk their fill. "Do you think we could catch one?"

Stripestar cocked his head. "What, are we RiverClan warriors now?"

"Never!" Galestar wrinkled her nose in a pretense of being offended. "We're StormClan cats. Till the day we die."

"Till the day we die," Stripestar echoed softly.

They touched noses, then pulled back, gazing at each other. Lost in the crystal blue of Galestar's eyes, Stripestar couldn't recall how they had ever come to argue with each other. *Who could possibly argue with a she-cat so wise . . . so beautiful . . . so perfect?*

It was all working out. All his doubts had faded, like shadows chased away by sunshine. Finally, after all their trials, they were building a Clan together. The Clan they had dreamed of, in a home that was just right for them.

We don't need StarClan, thought Stripestar. *We never needed them, or any other Clans.*

We only need each other.

"Shall we, then?" mewed Galestar.

Stripestar nodded. "Last one to catch a minnow is—"

"A furball," Galestar interrupted. "All right then, furball . . . Agreed!"

Two moons, thought Stripestar bitterly. *Two moons have changed everything.*

Wearily he scrambled over rough rocks that were too hot to step on for more than an instant. His paws throbbed from walking all morning, grubbing in the dirt for scrawny little rodents. They always seemed to find a stone to squeeze under and escape him. His stomach growled, his pelt was on fire, and his head swam from the beating sun. *This greenleaf! This endless, burning, scorching greenleaf.* He had never imagined how hot it would get up here on the mountain. No cat had.

Perhaps a drink of water might help.

But when he reached the little stream that ran close to their

camp, he saw to his dismay that it was no more than a trickle. Day by day, it was dwindling. How long before it dried up entirely?

Whitebreeze and Harewhisker were there already, lapping mournfully at the damp rocks. Not for the first time, Stripestar noticed with a prickle of concern how thin they were looking. He could see their ribs through their pelts. The Tribe cats had been wiry, but not like this.

"Let me guess," he croaked, his throat parched. "You had no luck either?"

Whitebreeze shook her head sadly. "Nothing but a measly lizard."

Instead of replying, Harewhisker ducked his head down and caught something between his teeth. *A beetle.* Stripestar watched with disgust as the warrior crunched and gulped it down. *We can't live like this.* There was barely enough prey here to feed a single cat, much less a whole Clan.

Apart from the hawks, of course. Stripestar had been so certain that they would catch more. But since that first time, they hadn't managed to bring down a single bird. What a triumph it had been! Now he understood—they had just been lucky.

He sighed and hung his head. What he wouldn't give to be back in the forest, in the cool green shade of ThunderClan's old camp . . .

But no, he scolded himself. He couldn't think like that.

He slumped to the ground, racking his brains through the fog of thirst and hunger. Could they move on? But the idea

made him feel even worse than he already did. Too many cats had died already, getting to this place. So they had to stay. They had to make it work for them. The Tribe of Rushing Water had done so, in those other mountains. *So why can't StormClan?*

Stripestar sprang up, a rush of fresh energy surging through his limbs. "Come on," he muttered. "With me."

Whitebreeze and Harewhisker followed him as he hopped across the rocks and down to the plateau where the Clan had made their camp. The bushes and plants that had grown around the area when they first arrived had all withered and died for lack of rain. The fresh-kill pile was barely a pile at all. And most of the camp was empty—every cat had clustered in the narrow triangle of shade that lay below the rock face. They all lay flat, panting and dazed by the sheer, relentless heat of the sun. *No more,* Stripestar told himself.

He leaped onto a boulder in full sunshine and perched there, drawing himself up tall. "Listen, all of you! I have something to say."

Barely any cat moved. Some didn't even bother to look at him.

"We can't go on like this," Stripestar continued, undeterred. "It's time for us to catch another hawk. *Together.* If we keep hunting—if we can get just a little more prey to eat—we'll have the strength to catch even more. We'll get better at it. Soon we'll be dining on hawk every day!"

"I don't know, Stripestar," grumbled Spotnose. "This place . . . it's too hard."

"The rocks are so uncomfortable," Roughpelt complained.

"And the heat!" added Nettlesting.

"And what about water?" added Harewhisker. "The Tribe cats had a whole waterfall! But here there's barely enough to drink. A few hawks won't solve that."

"So what do we do instead—simply give up?" Stripestar growled with exasperation. "Listen, with some more fresh-kill in our bellies, we'll have the strength to seek out another stream. A bigger stream. Or maybe there is a waterfall somewhere, like the Tribe had. But we won't find out just lazing around in the shade all day!"

"He's right." Galestar rose to her paws and shook herself, limbering up. "We've all but given up on the hawks. But they might be the answer. They might get us through this difficult season."

Their Clanmates muttered among themselves. They still didn't seem very enthusiastic. But at Galestar's words, they finally stirred, stiffly rising, stretching, and preparing themselves.

"That's more like it!" Stripestar cried, trying to buoy them up with his own excitement. "We'll make this place our home, you'll see. Now we'll split into hunting patrols. Four cats each. Today is the day, Clanmates. Today we catch a hawk!"

A short while later, Stripestar led his patrol up the mountain. He was hot and tired and hungry, but for the first time in a moon, he was buzzing with excitement. He jumped from rock to rock, savoring each bound, until they reached a high-up

ledge with some boulders strewn across it—the perfect spot to hide and wait.

His warriors settled down beside him in silence. They were some of the best hunters in StormClan—Flash, Tumbletail, and Berryfall. He would have trusted any one of them with his life. And today they would bring home a hawk for StormClan. *We're going to do it. I know we are!*

The other patrols had spread out across the mountainside, some heading downhill, others trotting around to the far side of the mountain. That way, surely one of them would get lucky. Only a pawful of warriors had stayed below in the camp to guard the kits and the elders—the rest were out hunting. It was a good plan. It was going to work.

Time passed slowly. The sun climbed, baking Stripestar's pelt until all he could think about was crawling into a dark, cool place and hiding from it. But he stayed still. This was their chance. Perhaps their *last* chance. If they didn't bring back fresh-kill today, he didn't know what they would do.

At last he caught a scent, familiar and delicious. *Mouse.* He felt the excitement crackle through the whole patrol. Muscles tensing. Whiskers quivering. Then they saw it run out among the stones. The mouse looked skinny and bony, with dust-clogged fur and hardly any meat on it. But none of that mattered, as long as a hawk sighted it.

A shadow came wheeling up above, wings spread wide as it soared through the blue.

Stripestar blinked, waiting. He forced himself to relax, to ignore the thunder of his beating heart. To be as still as the

very stones of the mountain. The time for movement would come, soon enough.

Then a distant sound floated up from below—the excitable squeal of a kit. *Rainkit*. She must have seen the bird too.

Stretching forward, as quietly as he could, Stripestar peered over the edge of the rocks. Down the mountainside, he saw the plateau of StormClan's camp from above, and the unmistakable white pelt of Rainkit, like a flower petal dancing on the breeze, as she scampered out into the open. Fernwhisper followed, yelping with alarm, calling her kit back to the nest.

The hawk screeched. A harsh cry that echoed out across the mountain side. And a cold claw closed suddenly around Stripestar's heart.

He lurched forward, hopelessly. But it was too late. The hawk dived. It dropped like a stone. Not onto the mouse, which had already shot back under cover.

Onto *Rainkit*.

Stripestar heard the kit squeal again, this time in terror. She struggled and flailed, as the huge bird snatched her up in its talons.

A wail of panic rose from StormClan's camp, every cat's voice mingled into one. Fernwhisper seized hold of Rainkit, tugging, hauling, screeching. Her hind legs left the ground, as she fought the hawk for her kit.

Then, with a desperate yowl, she tumbled back.

The hawk's wings beat the air, great flaps that rustled the bushes, sent pebbles bouncing away. In the space of a breath it

was up in the blue once again, beyond reach and disappearing fast, a dark dot getting smaller and smaller and carrying a little white bundle with it.

Stripestar could only watch, his guts roiling with horror. A distant wail dying in his ears. Until at last even that faded, and there was nothing left at all.

Another vigil. Another Clanmate lost.

And yet this was the worst of all.

In the cold, silver moonlight, Stripestar's whole body shuddered with grief. He felt as though he might collapse. As though he might be sick. It was almost more than he could bear.

She was only a kit. She had her whole life ahead of her.

Now she was nowhere, without even a body to bury.

In the marshes, StormClan had kept their silence for Mudsplash all through the night. But for the kit they had lost, Fernwhisper and Huntheart could not stay quiet. Long after moonhigh, the plateau rang with their anguished howls and the mewling of the kits who lived. Eventually the four of them had stumbled away from the camp, as though they could stand it no longer. No cat had tried to stop them. Not even Galestar, who had looked racked with pain and uncertainty.

Besides the hurt, Stripestar's belly churned with guilt. It had been *his* idea to hunt the hawks. And besides, hadn't he known all along? They were in the wrong place. His dream had warned him not to settle in the mountains. Stoneteller had warned them, too. *The place where the land falls away.* Why

hadn't he listened? He'd been so stupefied by the relief of having Galestar back by his side that he'd ignored his every instinct.

Now Rainkit had died for it. One of the very first kits to be born into StormClan—a sign of hope for them all. *Gone.*

Dawn broke at long last, orange light creeping across the plateau and gilding the pelts of the miserable cats of StormClan. It was beautiful. *A new day.* It should have brought some relief—some hope of a new beginning. But not this morning.

A scuffling among the rocks caught Stripestar's attention. He turned to see Fernwhisper and Huntheart approaching, along with Windkit and Lightningkit. They weren't bawling any more. They looked exhausted, but they strode with purpose.

The look that Fernwhisper gave Stripestar chilled his blood. It was so hard. So unforgiving. "I wish to speak," she told him.

Stripestar nodded and dipped his head, letting her address the circle of cats.

"We're leaving," Fernwhisper announced simply. A chorus of gasps and wails sounded all around the camp. But no cat tried to argue.

"We'll go back to the forest," Huntheart explained, his tail curled around the two miserable kits. "Maybe another Clan will take us in. Maybe not. But we're not staying here."

"We can't trust you," Fernwhisper spat at Stripestar. "Nor you, Galestar. Wherever we've roamed, the pair of you have only led us into disaster. You've shown us that you cannot

keep our family safe. So may StarClan light your path . . . but we are StormClan no longer."

Galestar looked thunderstruck. Her blue eyes glittered with sorrow. She opened her mouth, as though to speak, then shut it again.

After all, what is there to say?

They were right, and Stripestar couldn't blame them. *We failed them. We failed all our Clanmates.*

As the four cats turned and set off without another word, Stripestar looked around at the unhappy faces of StormClan. He had a sick feeling in his gut. A feeling that Fernwhisper and Huntheart wouldn't be the last to abandon them.

Who would StormClan lose next?

CHAPTER 19

Galestar lay on the dusty ground near StormClan's camp, watching the pitiful stream seeping across the rocks. The water had almost dried up entirely now. *Just like our hopes.*

The afternoon was cool, the sky pale and hazy, and a gentle breeze carried the low, mournful murmurs of the other cats to her. The whole Clan had stayed up all night for the vigil, but apparently they were no more able to sleep than she was.

All day long, Fernwhisper's words had echoed in her memory.

We can't trust you.

You cannot keep our family safe.

The pair of you have only led us into disaster.

The accusations stung her like nettles, because they were true. They were *all* true. She and Stripestar were responsible for the fate of StormClan—no other cat. If they hadn't fallen in love, if they hadn't insisted on dragging their Clans into it, if they hadn't defied StarClan, then none of these terrible things would have happened.

Stripestar shifted slightly. Galestar had almost forgotten

he was there, lying silent at her side. His presence was no great comfort, but she was glad of it all the same. *At least we're together in our failure.*

She felt as though she would never forget that look on Stripestar's face in the moment when Fernwhisper and Huntheart had announced that they were leaving. The way his whiskers had drooped and his eyes had turned dull. He had been defeated. Stunned. Beaten.

Galestar could still remember a time when she thought that *nothing* could defeat Stripestar.

The sun was dipping low in the sky when Tinyclaw came clambering over the rocks to sit beside them. Galestar could tell at once that the deputy had bad news. The slump of the she-cat's shoulders made her look even more serious and dejected than usual. "Stripestar? Galestar? Our Clanmates want to have a meeting."

Stripestar barely reacted—just stared at his forepaws and flicked his tail.

Galestar felt heavy with grief and foreboding. But she rose to her paws with a sigh. "Very well. Let's hear it."

The three of them made their way slowly back to the camp.

The shadows were lengthening across the plateau, leaving only the rocky edges still gilded by evening sunlight. On the darkening ground, StormClan awaited them. It made Galestar's heart ache all over again to see their thin, underfed bodies. *Our fault.* But worse still was the way they stood with heads bowed, no cat speaking, watching their leaders approach with sad eyes.

It felt like another vigil, Galestar realized. But not for a cat. *This is a vigil for a Clan.*

Galestar and Stripestar settled themselves on a large, flat-topped boulder where every cat could see them, with Tinyclaw standing below.

A long, uncomfortable silence stretched out across the camp. Galestar shot a glance at her mate, but he didn't seem to want to break it. He hung his head, resigned to whatever was to come.

In the distance, a hawk's shriek seared across the sky. *Rain-kit!* Galestar flinched, as though it were happening all over again—the kit snatched away before their eyes. An apprentice yelped, and one or two of the elders gazed nervously up into the twilight.

It took Galestar a moment to settle herself. "Well, then?" she asked. "You wanted to speak with us. So speak."

Paws shuffled. Tails twitched. Fleeting looks passed between nervous warriors.

At last, Whitestep came forward. "You have tried to make good decisions," she meowed in a loud, clear voice. "We all know that. And I speak as a warrior who has stayed loyal to StormClan. Always. Even after Rosebush." She faltered a little at the mention of her mate, then drew herself up again. "But now . . . now is the time for you to show your loyalty to us."

"What do you mean?" Galestar demanded.

"It's over." Stoneflower stepped forward, fixing them with his stern gaze. "How many 'new homes' have we found? And each and every one of them has turned out to be full of peril. How many more cats will have to die before—"

"What we're saying is, we've had enough," Tumbletail interrupted. "We want to go back."

"Back where?" Tumbletail's words had finally roused Stripestar from his gloom. He looked stricken with despair. As though he knew, just as well as Galestar, what the reply would be.

"There is only one place we know that has truly been a home for us," Whitestep replied. "And for our ancestors. For generations." There was no anger in her voice. Softly, almost kindly, she spoke the last words that Galestar and Stripestar wanted to hear. "It's time to go back to the forest."

Galestar nodded, trying not to let any cat see how her heart was breaking. "Is that so?" she mewed. "And are you all agreed?"

A ripple of meows spread through the Clan, some cats nodding, even thumping the ground with their tails. Galestar saw at once that their minds were made up.

But that doesn't mean we're giving in without a fight.

She turned to her mate, hoping for encouragement. But to her disappointment, Stripestar looked shattered. He had never been good at keeping his feelings hidden. *So it's up to me.*

"Listen," Galestar meowed, as loudly and as confidently as she could. "I understand how difficult this journey has been. How painful. We feel that pain too, I promise you. But what you are suggesting . . . is it even possible? You know why we left the forest in the first place. You know how hard it was, after the fire, when the prey left."

"By now the prey will have returned!" Stoneflower interjected. "Seasons have passed."

"That may be so," Galestar spoke over the swell of purred agreement. "But what of our old territory? Do you really believe that RiverClan and ShadowClan will have left it alone? Of course not! They'll have seized it for themselves. Do you want to fight them for it?"

"Perhaps." Whitestep shrugged her shoulders. "We may have to. But who can say what has happened in the forest while we have been gone? Only one thing is certain. We can't stay here!"

"It's too dangerous!" yowled Spotnose.

"The water is running out," added Goldenleaf.

"And the prey fights back," muttered Hazelfrond with a shudder.

As the other cats chorused their agreement, Galestar and Stripestar looked into each other's eyes. *It's a bad idea.* Galestar was certain that Stripestar was thinking the same way she was. What were they to do—go groveling to Birchstar and Snakestar, to beg for their territory back? Her neck fur bristled at the very thought of it. Besides, StarClan would hardly forgive them after all that had happened, and how were they to live in the forest without the blessing of their ancestors?

But what was the alternative?

Because Whitestep was right. They couldn't stay here. Not after Rainkit. And to insist that the Clan push on to somewhere new—*another new hope, another fresh disappointment, another untold tragedy*—was asking too much.

Galestar let out a long, slow sigh as she gazed at Stripestar. And in return he gave the smallest nod, just enough for Galestar to understand. *We're in agreement.*

Raising a paw, Galestar brought the Clan to silence once again. "You've lost faith in us," she told them. A few cats looked away or opened their mouths to contradict her. But none did.

"I do not blame you for it," Galestar continued, forcing the words out of her tightening throat. "But remember this. We have not lost faith in you, and we never will. We are all StormClan, and we will not ask any cat to go against their will. Tomorrow, at sunrise, we will set out for the forest. What we find there, and what dangers we may face along the way, no cat can tell. But we will go together. As one Clan."

All around the plateau, the cats dipped their heads in assent.

"StormClan!" Tinyclaw raised the cry. "StormClaaaaaaan!"

Every cat joined in, yowling up at the faint moon that hung high in the deep blue sky.

Was it Galestar's imagination, or was there something a little . . . halfhearted about it?

What if StormClan is over?

The thought made her heart clench, and she sank back onto the boulder, feeling as though all the energy had drained from her at once, like rainwater tipping off a shaken branch. Maybe they were all together still. *For now.* But this was an ending. Even if RiverClan and ShadowClan did allow them back, and even if they gave up the territory that had been WindClan's and ThunderClan's, Birchstar and Snakestar would never allow StormClan to stay together. They would have to reform their old Clans or join new ones.

Galestar looked at Stripestar and saw him huddled with sadness, his ears flattened against his head. Gently she laid her tail against his, felt his fur brush ever so slightly against hers. *It's our dream that's died,* she thought. And sometimes it seemed as though that dream was the only thing that kept Stripestar going.

How were they to be mates after all this? There was no way that Stripestar would become a WindClan warrior. No way that Galestar would join ThunderClan.

So what will become of us?

Galestar had no answer.

She looked out from the mountainside across the shadowy landscape that stretched away to the horizon, the Twoleg lights glimmering into view here and there, like reflections of the stars above. *Such a long journey back to the forest.* They hadn't even set out yet. But already she felt tired.

"I can see it! The apple forest!" Up at the top of the hill, Palepaw leaped and swiped at the air with delight, silhouetted against a bright blue afternoon sky. She stopped to draw scent deep into her nostrils. "Great StarClan, it smells so *good*!"

Galestar gritted her teeth as she labored up the hillside below in full sunshine, trying very hard not to be irritated by the apprentice's sheer enthusiasm. *StarClan has nothing to do with it,* she thought, angrily. Her paws ached. Her head ached. *Everything* ached.

On their journey from the forest territories, Galestar had always led StormClan from the front. Now it was her

Clanmates who scampered and scurried ahead, eager to reach their destination. It made her feel like a bitter, grumpy elder to begrudge them their good spirits. But still. *Isn't it enough that we agreed to go back? Do they all have to be so . . . happy about it?*

"Are you all right?" asked Stripestar. His eyes were wide with concern as he hung back next to her. He didn't even seem to be out of breath like Galestar was.

"I'm fine," Galestar snapped back.

"Sorry. I know. It's just . . . You seem tired."

"Aren't you?"

Stripestar looked away, wisely deciding not to answer the question.

"*I'm* sorry," muttered Galestar, trying for a gentler tone. "I'm just a little weary, I suppose. We've been traveling for days."

Stripestar nodded. "And you've hardly eaten. Hold on—I think I smell field mice." Galestar caught the scent of them too, and it turned her stomach. "I'll catch some for you."

"Wait!" called Galestar. But it was too late—her mate had already darted off across the grass in search of the prey. She felt like retching at the mere thought of the mice. And why didn't she feel hungry? It was true that she hadn't eaten since . . . when was it? She shook her head, unable to remember.

Panting, Galestar reached the top of the hill. She had to admit, it *was* a relief to see the apple forest again, the neat lines of trees stretching out in the valley below, and the row of monsters close to where the Twoleg kits had tried to trick them with the delicious white meat. *At least we're going in the right*

direction. There were Twolegs moving among the trees now—she could see them in their brightly colored greenleaf pelts, even from so far away. "This time we'll go around the apple forest instead of through it," Galestar declared. "But tonight we'll make camp on the hillside."

As Tinyclaw set out with a pawful of warriors to scout a good spot to build nests, Galestar gazed beyond the apple trees toward the woods and fields that rolled out to the horizon. *Still so far to go.* She sighed heavily.

Stripestar came trotting up with a pair of mice dangling from his jaws and dropped them at her forepaws. "Here." He nudged the fresh-kill toward her. "Eat something? For me?"

Galestar snorted. "I don't think so. I couldn't manage a bite. I haven't felt this way since—" She broke off, suddenly realizing. *Of course.*

"What? What's the matter?" Stripestar looked more worried than ever.

"Nothing," Galestar replied quickly. She swallowed hard. "Will you organize some hunting patrols? I think . . . I think I need to rest for a while."

"Of course."

Galestar watched Stripestar pad away, calling warriors to him, sorting them into groups.

Can it really be possible?

She would have to speak with Goldenleaf to make sure. But she knew it, deep in her bones. After all—there was one other time she had felt like this.

She didn't know whether to sink to the ground and never

get up again, or whether to leap with joy. She felt dazed. She felt as though she might be sick.

Tonight, she promised herself. *I'll tell him tonight.*

Tinyclaw had found a shallow dip in the hillside that was sheltered from the wind, and plenty of ferns with which to make soft, comfortable nests. By the time the stars were glittering distantly in a clear night sky, the cats of StormClan were mostly fast asleep and snoring peacefully.

Galestar only wished she felt so relaxed. But as she sat waiting in her nest, her whole body thrummed with anxiety. Sleep was the very last thing on her mind.

At long last, Stripestar came slinking out of the dark, his eyes glinting. "The guards are all placed." He yawned and stretched. "I'm so tired I feel like my paws are going to fall off! We'll sleep well tonight."

"But not yet," murmured Galestar.

Stripestar cocked his head, looking at her curiously. "What do you mean?"

"Let's take a walk."

Together, the two leaders slipped through the camp, weaving among the shadowy forms of their slumbering Clanmates. Galestar led her mate past Roughpelt and Berryfall, who sat guarding the lower slopes below. The warriors watched their leaders pass by with interest, but didn't challenge them.

"Where are we going?" muttered Stripestar.

"Somewhere we can talk," Galestar told him.

At the bottom of the hill, Twolegs had made a wooden

fence. They ducked under it and prowled in among the rows of apple trees. All was still and quiet here in the apple forest. The lights had gone out in the Twolegplace, and the monsters had all departed.

When they reached the middle of the forest, Galestar stopped and settled herself on the dry earth. Stripestar silently took up his place beside her, gazing all around. They were alone here among the trees, with the sweet scent of apples filling their nostrils, in the light of a silver moon that was almost full.

Butterflies danced in Galestar's belly. Something about this warm, peaceful greenleaf night reminded her of the nights the two of them had spent together, so long ago, at Fourtrees. Before any other cat knew of their love. When it was just a secret between her and Stripestar.

She still felt nervous. But excited, too.

"Galestar?" murmured Stripestar.

She looked into his twinkling amber eyes. He seemed so strong tonight, his ears pricked with anticipation, his tabby fur burning-gold at the tips. *Just like in the old days.* She drank in the familiar scent of him, smelling it as though for the first time. The bracken and pine scent that brought so many fond memories tumbling back to her.

"I . . . have something to tell you," she breathed. "I haven't spoken with Goldenleaf yet, or Stoneflower . . . but I am certain."

A soft gasp escaped Stripestar. He leaned in close, touching his warm, wet nose against hers. "Is it . . . ?"

"Yes," Galestar told him. "I am with kits."

She whispered it, offering it to him like a gift. *Now we are the only two cats in the whole world to share this secret,* she thought happily. It was theirs, and theirs alone.

When Stripestar pulled slowly back, his eyes were glistening with emotion. He opened his mouth, then closed it again, as though he didn't know what to say.

"I know," Galestar assured him. "I know what happened before. It wasn't easy. And now . . . Now things are so different."

They sat in silence, leaning into each other and trying to savor the wonder of the moment for as long as they could, without thinking about what it really meant.

But it couldn't last forever.

"This—this journey," stammered Stripestar. "We have so much farther to go. And you're already . . ."

"Exhausted?" finished Galestar. She sighed heavily. "It's true. And I don't want to put this litter in danger. I *can't*. Not after last time. Besides, even if we all survive the journey, we might not find a home in the forest. At least not without a fight."

Stripestar nodded gloomily. "I can't imagine Birchstar and Snakestar will be too pleased to see us."

"And our Clanmates have already told us they want to go back. It won't be easy to change their minds." Galestar groaned and lay down flat on the ground. "I know. This changes everything."

They lapsed into silent thought again. Once more, Galestar found herself trying to imagine what it might be like to

join ThunderClan. *Because surely that's the only way that StormClan could live in the forest—as ThunderClan and WindClan.* But it felt wrong somehow.

Our kits will be StormClan kits, she thought defiantly. They had to be. *Or else all of this will have been for nothing.*

But where did that leave them? After all the dangers they had encountered, where could they find that would possibly be a safe place for Galestar to give birth to the litter? She wanted to believe that this was a sign—perhaps not from StarClan, but from *some* power . . . a sign that they shouldn't give up on their Clan. But it was so hard, after all that had happened.

"We could . . . ," started Stripestar, then trailed off.

"What if . . . ," began Galestar, but she had no way to finish the thought.

Under the pale moon they sat. Still excited. Still anxious. But most of all, fearful.

"Wake up! Every cat, wake up!"

Galestar groaned and rolled over, crushing the ferns of the nest she shared with Stripestar. Slowly shaking off her slumber, she winced at the bright sunshine that pierced her eyelids. The sun had risen, casting their hillside camp in golden light.

"Wake *up*!" came the cry again.

Galestar leaped to her paws. Her body ached from an uncomfortable night's sleep, but alarm coursed through her, startling her into wakefulness. "What is it?" she yowled. "A badger? A fox? Twolegs?"

All around, the cats of StormClan were stirring, grumbling as they woke.

"Is it even dawn yet?" growled Tumbletail.

Blinking, Galestar saw to her surprise that it was Goldenleaf who was yelling, scurrying around the camp and trying to rouse every cat. The medicine cat looked nearly frantic, wild-eyed with excitement. "It's no danger," she cried. "No danger at all."

"Then what in Silverpelt is the matter?" Stripestar groggily sat upright. "This had better be important."

"It is!" the medicine cat declared. "At least, I believe it is. I must speak with the Clan. The *whole* Clan, at once."

Stripestar looked like he might be about to argue, but Galestar felt a strange flutter of excitement in her belly. "Very well," she replied. "Let's hear what you have to say."

It took a good while to wake the elders and gather their Clanmates. But at last StormClan was assembled around a grassy hillock, where Goldenleaf stood, hopping from paw to paw with impatience. At last, Galestar gave her a nod. "Well, then?" she purred.

"I've had a dream," Goldenleaf announced.

"We've all had *dreams*," scoffed Tumbletail.

But Goldenleaf shook her head. "Not like this. This dream was a vision. Like the one I had in the Twoleg den, when I was shown the mark of StormClan. But this time . . . this time I know who sent it to me. It was Kestrelwing! He appeared before me, as clear as day."

A murmur spread through the Clan. Cats sat up straighter,

leaning in to listen closely. Galestar shared a glance with Stripestar. She could feel the spark of excitement passing between them.

"Go on," murmured Stripestar. "What did he say?"

"Nothing," replied Goldenleaf.

Groans sounded on all sides.

"I mean, he didn't actually breathe a word," Goldenleaf added quickly. "But he showed me something. We were standing together on a stretch of sand, strewn with pebbles and weeds. So much sand! More than I've ever seen before. On one side there was long grass, and on the other . . . just *water*, stretching all the way to the horizon. Great StarClan, it was like a lake without end! In the distance I could see the sun sinking into the lake—as though it were drowning."

A cold claw gripped Galestar's stomach. *The lake without end.* Was this what Stoneteller had warned them of, so many moons ago? Hadn't she used those very same words? She looked at Stripestar. But he wasn't paying her any attention. He was starry-eyed, lost in hope.

For all her worry, it made Galestar's heart sing to see him like that.

"We were there," Goldenleaf continued. "All of StormClan! There were kits, too, playing in the sand. It looked like a home." She gazed around at her rapt audience. "Well, don't you see? Kestrelwing has shown us what our true destination must be. Not the forest. Our destiny does not lie there. It lies at this strange new place. The lake that never ends!"

Galestar flinched at those same words yet again. Even

Stripestar seemed to frown a little. But at the same time, Goldenleaf's dream lit a fire deep inside Galestar.

Kits, playing in the sand!

It was the very answer they had been looking for. A safe place to have her litter. A place where their whole family could be StormClan. How could she possibly turn that down? Even if it was the place Stoneteller had warned them of, perhaps it would be all right to stop there, just for a little while—long enough for the Clan to rest. Surely Kestrelwing's message must be that this was where her kits would be born.

Their Clanmates were already chattering excitedly among themselves.

"I don't know about this," muttered Frecklepelt. "How can we be sure that Kestrelwing wanted us to go to this place? Perhaps it was a warning!"

Goldenleaf shook her head. "The very last thing I saw before I woke up was a greenleaf storm. Then lightning split the sky. A *bolt* of lightning, just like the mark of StormClan. It pointed the way—the way to the endless lake."

"If we follow the setting sun, we will surely find it," mused Stoneflower thoughtfully. "Wherever it is."

"But what of these kits that you saw?" demanded Peaktail. "The only kits in StormClan are gone, along with Fernwhisper and Huntheart. Kestrelwing must have been mistaken!"

"No." Galestar stepped forward. She felt the eyes of the whole Clan on her as she stood tall. Pride surged through her like a fast-flowing river. "Kestrelwing was not mistaken."

It took every cat a few moments to understand. Then they

crowded around, breaking the silence with meows of congratulations and delight, nuzzling their leader and rubbing their flanks against hers. Goldenleaf was among them, inspecting Galestar carefully, until at last she gave a nod of assent. Galestar basked in it all, enjoying the moment of sheer joy like a shaft of sunshine breaking through the clouds on a cold, gray day. Beyond the throng of warriors she saw Stripestar watching her, his eyes glittering with pride to match her own.

At length the cats broke apart, and Stripestar sprang up next to Goldenleaf, tail raised for silence to address the Clan. "We told you all that we would guide you back to the forest," he declared. "I myself believe in Goldenleaf's dream. I believe it shows us what StormClan should do next. But as Galestar told you, we will not force any cat to go against their will. If you still wish to return to the forest, we will lead you there."

There was another silence, and for a moment Galestar feared the worst. Then Flash stepped forward. "To the lake that never ends!" he roared, to a chorus of agreement.

Galestar's heart leaped. *Perhaps StormClan isn't finished after all.* Glancing around, she saw some cats looking uncomfortable or simply unsure. But none spoke against the plan.

"So, it is decided." Stripestar's chest swelled visibly with relief. "We leave today. This morning we will flee the sun. And at midday we will pursue it!"

"And let every cat take comfort," added Goldenleaf. "Perhaps it is true that StarClan no longer watches over us. But Kestrelwing surely does."

A murmur of wonder ran all around the cats of StormClan.

We have our own ancestors, thought Galestar. *StormClan ancestors!*

Once more she felt hope bloom inside her for them all—a hope she'd thought was dead. Hope for her and Stripestar, for StormClan, and most importantly for their kits. *We really do have a future.*

Now all they had to do was fight for it.

CHAPTER 20

A *cold leaf-fall wind blew in* across the endless lake, buffeting Stripestar and chilling him to the bone. It was hard enough to walk as it was, with each paw step sinking deep into the wet gray sand. But with the wind knocking him off course, he was making slow progress.

The howl of the lake filled his ears, and the smell of it clogged his nostrils. It was a half-moon since they had arrived in this strange, unfamiliar place—*the sun-drown-place*, they had named it—and Stripestar hadn't even begun to feel settled. Why did the lake keep foaming and frothing against the shore, all day and night? Why did it cover the beach at times, then retreat to leave a vast, damp expanse of sand?

But it was the smell that seemed most peculiar of all—a pervasive stench of fish and damp vegetation that made it almost impossible to scent anything else.

Maybe *that* was why the hunting was so bad.

With a sigh, Stripestar plodded on alone beneath the blank gray sky, heading back for camp. When Goldenleaf had told them of her dream, she had made this place sound like it was going to be a perfect, happy home for them. *How wrong we were!*

A sudden squawk caught his attention, and he froze, ears pricked. A large white gull had landed not far off, perched on one of the rocks that were scattered here and there across the sand. It was peering at a lump of rotten wood, tangled with green weeds, head jerking as it examined the object. Either it was ignoring Stripestar, or it hadn't spotted him yet.

Stripestar's stomach growled. He'd had enough close calls with these irritable birds to know that they weren't easy prey. *Not like a nice fat squirrel . . . or a tasty vole . . .* but he was so hungry. And the gull was right here in front of him.

Lowering his belly to the sand, Stripestar crept forward. He moved as slowly as he dared, his mouth filling with saliva at the thought of snapping his jaws shut around the bird's fragile neck.

Nearly there . . .

He bunched his hind legs, ready to spring. A pebble turned under his back paw, scraping against the sand. A tiny sound. But the gull gave a sudden harsh cry and took off, great wings beating the air.

Fox dung! Stripestar cursed his bad luck, then froze again as a shadow fell over him. The gull had wheeled in the air. Now it dropped, swooping down, its beak snapping viciously.

With a squeal, Stripestar rolled behind the lump of damp wood.

The gull shrieked and jerked upward at the last moment, climbing again as it flew away.

Stripestar slumped behind his shelter, letting his heart rate slow. *These wretched gulls . . .* StormClan had managed to catch

a pawful of them, but it was such hard work—almost as bad as hunting hawks in the mountains. And just like the hawks, these gulls fought back. Stoneflower and Goldenleaf had already treated Flash for a beak wound to his shoulder, and Hazelfrond's tail had been nearly torn off by another bird.

Even when they *did* manage to catch one, it was poor fresh-kill. The gulls were lean and stringy and bony, and they tasted of nothing but fish and brackish water.

With a heavy heart, Stripestar rose and trudged onward, trying to ignore the biting wind. Seeing the gull had reminded him just how hungry he was. He gazed around at the desolate stretch of sand. Sometimes the gulls left half-eaten fish lying around. Sometimes odd little creatures with spindly legs and hard shells came scuttling out from under rocks and could be caught with one swift swipe of a forepaw. But even they had sharp claws that pinched. And besides, they were almost impossible to eat.

Instead Stripestar veered toward the rocky hill that led away from the endless lake and clambered up its slopes. Here, long grass rustled and swayed in the wind. It wasn't exactly like the moor near Fourtrees, but at least it wasn't quite so strange.

The wind dropped for a moment, and a whiff of shrew came to Stripestar's nostrils. Then he spotted the grass moving as the little creature shuffled across the sand. He crept closer. With a quick pounce, he snatched the squirming little shrew up in his mouth and crunched its bones beneath his teeth until it hung limp and dripping.

With difficulty, Stripestar fought off the impulse to gulp it down in one swallow. Instead he carried it back toward where the shore curled at the end of the sand.

Scrambling across the rocks, Stripestar soon spotted the camp, where it lay in shelter at the foot of a sheer, dark rock face. Warriors were bustling here and there, heaving great mounds of the slippery green weeds that seemed to grow and drift in abundance in the endless lake.

"Over there," Galestar called to Tinyclaw, directing the deputy. "The elders will need a big heap of it if they're to stay comfortable."

Stripestar's heart warmed a little to see that his Clanmates had almost finished remaking the dens. Most of them had been destroyed by the vicious leaf-fall storm. *The wind blows so strongly here!* All through the night the storm had raged, and even the nests that had been tucked away in caves within the rock face had been flooded and washed away.

As he reached the sandy camp, the rain began to spit once more, gently tickling at his pelt. *How long before another storm comes?* This wasn't the first time they'd had to rebuild everything. Stripestar had a feeling it wouldn't be the last.

He thrust the thought away like it was moldy crow-food.

"You should be resting," he scolded Galestar, dropping the shrew next to her. "You'll need all your strength when the kits come."

Galestar nuzzled him with affection as he curled his tail around her protectively. Her belly was swollen now, her flanks stretched and straining. Even a little walk around the camp

seemed like an enormous effort and left her exhausted. But to Stripestar's relief, she didn't seem to be suffering any of the stabbing pains that she had experienced the first time.

"Goldenleaf tells me it could be any day now," Galestar murmured softly. "Can you imagine it?"

Stripestar's heart jumped even as a worry wormed at his guts. "I can't wait. But . . . I don't know. Is this place really safe for kits?" he mewed uneasily. "What if the water comes rushing through our camp? Or the rains come pouring again, like last night and the quarter moon before that?"

Galestar's brow furrowed, her tail flicking in thought.

While she considered, Stripestar trotted to the fresh-kill pile to add his shrew. The little heap was pitiful, barely enough to feed the Clan for a few days, and there was nothing there that was even slightly appetizing. The thought came again, unwanted but insistent. *How can we take care of our kits here?*

Glancing back, Stripestar caught Galestar's eye and she nodded—*let's talk.*

Together they made their way to a dry patch of sand close to the camp.

"You're right," sighed Galestar when she was sure no cat was listening in. "I don't like this place either. And I've been thinking—what if Goldenleaf was wrong about her dream after all? Would Kestrelwing really have led us into danger again?"

Stripestar shook his head, sadly. "I don't think so. But where does that leave us? Do we tell the Clan that we're moving on again?"

"We can't move. Not until after the kits are born and big enough to travel. But after that we may have to." Galestar looked troubled. "Our Clanmates won't like it, of course. *Another* new home abandoned. And where would we go next?"

They fell silent.

"Whatever we decide, we have to tell them something now," Galestar muttered, at last. "If we keep our plans secret, it might only make things worse. They've already lost so much faith in us."

"So which of us should—"

"I'll do it." Galestar drew herself up with determination. "It will be better coming from me. I'm heavy with kits, after all. They'll understand that I'm only doing what's best for the litter. What I *have* to do."

"Then I'll go hunting," Stripestar meowed. "I'm sick of gull! I want to find some real fresh-kill. That should cheer every cat up."

Galestar dipped her head in agreement. "Good luck. And Stripestar?"

He was already turning to go, but he cast a glance back over his shoulder. The very sight of her and her swollen belly made him tremble with love. *The mother of my kits.*

"Come back safely," purred Galestar.

The stink of the carrionplace was even more overwhelming than the fishy stench of the endless lake. So many bizarre Twoleg smells all mingling together! It made Stripestar hungry and turned his stomach at the same time.

Crouched behind a bush at the edge of the narrow Thunderpath that ran close to the shore, he leaned carefully around to study the carrionplace. There it was, next to a small Twoleg den and just beyond the strip of hard, dark ground where the monsters prowled. It wasn't so different from the one in ShadowClan's territory back in the forest. A row of big square containers, each one brightly colored but sun-faded, cracked, and stained. Every single one was overflowing with Twoleg trash, some bound up in a shiny black material, some just loose and spilling out. A silver mesh fence ran around the outside. *Good for keeping out Twolegs. Hopeless against warriors.*

Stripestar looked around carefully. No monsters today. No Twolegs either.

"Let me see!" whispered Tumbletail.

Stripestar allowed the big, strong tom to push past and get a good look for himself. He was glad to have Tumbletail at his side. His Clanmate was a great hunter and a fearsome warrior besides, and he had known him since they were both kits in ThunderClan. *But he's also a born troublemaker.* Stripestar hadn't just chosen Tumbletail for his fighting prowess. A part of him had also wanted to make sure the tom wasn't around when Galestar announced their plans to move on again.

"Looks empty," hissed Tumbletail. "Should we do this?"

"Follow me." Stripestar waved his tail.

They darted out, Stripestar in the lead, with Tumbletail close at his heels. After checking up and down the Thunderpath, they ran across and leaped up onto the fence. It clattered and shook as they hauled themselves up and dropped down on the other side, landing softly inside the carrionplace.

Stripestar was trying not to think too hard about what they were doing. Picking through Twoleg trash . . . it seemed a little too close to scavenging for comfort. But they'd found delicious things to eat there over the last half-moon. *And it's a lot easier than chasing after gulls.*

Tumbletail began rooting through a heap of rotting Twoleg food while Stripestar sniffed and pawed at one of the shiny black mounds of trash.

A sound made them both freeze. Stripestar strained his ears. What was it they'd heard? It sounded like something shuffling somewhere among the trash . . .

Tumbletail hissed and arched his back. Then Stripestar saw it too, and his heart leaped. Scratching among trash on the ground nearby was a large brown rat. It was big—much bigger than the skinny little shrew that Stripestar had caught in the long grass by the shore. *Look at the meat on that!* Stripestar only had to glance at his Clanmate to see that he was thinking the same thing—Tumbletail was practically salivating.

The rat must have noticed them, but it didn't seem afraid. Apparently it was too busy digging into some greasy Twoleg food to care.

"We'll take it together," purred Stripestar softly. "Just don't let it bite you."

Tumbletail nodded, wide-eyed. He must have heard the same stories from ShadowClan cats that Stripestar had, back at long-ago Gatherings in the forest. Rats were fine prey as long as they weren't in packs, and as long as they didn't bite. Their filthy fangs could give a warrior a horrible sickness, sometimes bad enough to kill.

Stripestar set off, prowling silently through the trash. He took each paw step as carefully as if he were crossing a frozen river. Tumbletail moved with him, matching his rhythm. Slowly and smoothly, they circled the rat. They cut off its escape routes.

Still the rat sat there, its bright eyes gleaming. It gnawed the Twoleg food, its tail flicking happily as it enjoyed its meal. *Its last meal,* thought Stripestar.

His gaze met Tumbletail's, and the warrior flattened his ears in a signal. *The prey is yours.*

Stripestar crouched low. Muscles tensed. Ready to spring.

Then he caught something on the breeze. A strange scent, barely noticeable through the thick, dizzying stink of the carrionplace. He hesitated. *What is that?* The rat dropped the food, blinking, as though it had smelled it too.

The fear came in a sudden cold rush, like the swash of lake water against the shore.

Twolegs!

Tumbletail jerked, his fur standing on end as he stared at something behind Stripestar. He yowled out a warning.

But it was too late—Stripestar had already pounced.

The rat chittered with terror as Stripestar's paws slammed onto it. He snagged its tail, pressed down on its neck. A fierce rush of triumph shot through his body. Then a shadow fell across all three of them. Something swooped down from above.

Stripestar's stomach lurched as he was caught, falling head over tail. He flew upward. Then he fell again, tumbling

together with Tumbletail and the rat, all trapped in some peculiar, tangling material. *What in Silverpelt . . . ?*

Dimly Stripestar became aware that a Twoleg was hoisting them up, using some horrible stick with hanging vines that crisscrossed each other. Stripestar squirmed and wriggled, but it only seemed to make him more stuck. He yowled with panic. The rat squealed, pressed against Stripestar's flank, and a hot pain lanced into him. The creature's jaws had snapped shut on his flesh.

With another furious yowl, Stripestar shook the rat off. Out of the corner of his eye he saw it tumble through a gap in the vines—*free*—and scurry away, disappearing among the trash. But there was no gap big enough for the cats to squeeze through.

The bite wound throbbed, more painful than it had any right to be.

Stripestar felt sick as they dangled and swayed to and fro, held aloft in the air. Panting with fear, he peered through the vines at the Twoleg that had caught them. It looked too big to be a kit, too small to be an adult. Its head and face were covered in a light fuzz of dark fur, and its cold blue eyes stared back at them in a way that made Stripestar shudder. There was something odd about this Twoleg. Something too intense about its gaze.

"Put us down!" Tumbletail screeched. "Let us go, Twoleg!"

"I don't think it's going to," Stripestar muttered. He felt dizzy with fear and pain. His flank was hot and wet with blood where the rat had bitten him.

The Twoleg began to carry them, heaving them up and down with every step. Stripestar's alarm only grew as he saw that they were leaving the carrionplace, passing through a gap in the fence, then down a track that ran between the trash heap and the Twoleg den. The Twoleg pushed through a tall, rotting wooden fence at the back of the den, then carried them into a small overgrown area, enclosed by the fence.

Looking around, Stripestar felt his heart begin to pound wildly.

"Great StarClan, no!" breathed Tumbletail.

The little clearing was full of animals. There were a few squirrels and a mangy-looking dog. There was even a gull with a broken wing. But every one of them was trapped, shut up inside Twoleg contraptions that were roughly cobbled together out of wood, with silver mesh across the front to keep the creatures from getting out.

A dozen pairs of sad, mournful eyes watched the Twoleg as he carried the cats over to an empty trap. A dozen skinny bodies trembled in the chill air. Every animal looked sick, hungry, and thirsty. Every one of the little spaces they were stuck in looked too small, with barely enough room for them to turn around.

"I'm not going in that thing," Tumbletail grunted, his wide eyes fixed on the empty trap. "We have to get out of here. We *have* to!"

"I know that!" hissed Stripestar. "Just be ready . . ."

The Twoleg stopped in front of the trap. Resting the stick on its shoulder, it leaned down to fiddle with the mesh. As it

did so, the cats swung close to the bare skin between its upper and lower pelt. *No time to think it through.*

"Now!" screamed Stripestar. Thrusting his forepaw through the vines, he released his claws and dug them deep, slicing into the Twoleg's exposed flesh.

The Twoleg bellowed. He dropped them on the ground. Twisting and writhing, Stripestar and Tumbletail slipped free of the vines and dashed across the scrubby, yellow grass. A din rose up all around—squirrels chattering, the gull crying, dogs barking . . . and loudest of all, the furious shouts of the injured Twoleg.

The Twoleg had left a gap in the fence. The two cats streaked straight through it, racing out onto the track between the carrionplace and the Twoleg den.

Stripestar heard the thunder of the Twoleg's paws as it came lumbering after them. Its curses echoed in their ears as they sped across the Thunderpath.

But to his relief, it didn't follow them. As they dived into the bushes on the far side and ran on through the grass, its hideous noises faded. Stripestar was left only with the nightmare memory of those angry sounds—and the Twoleg blood that stained his forepaw.

"I suppose this will have to do," muttered Stripestar a short while later.

Sadly, he and Tumbletail surveyed the miserable haul of fresh-kill they had found hunting around the long grass of the shore. Another shrew, even scrawnier than this morning's,

and a pair of field mice.

"The hunting here," Tumbletail grumbled. "It's almost as bad as the mountain!"

"You want to go back to the carrionplace?" asked Stripestar.

Tumbletail shuddered and vigorously shook his head.

They fell silent and Stripestar thought wistfully of the large rat that had slipped from their claws. *That would have been a decent enough prize to take back to StormClan.* But the prospect of finding another one wasn't enough to tempt him back to the carrionplace. After that sinister Twoleg, nothing could.

"We'll leave that place well alone from now on," Stripestar decided. "I'll make sure the hunting patrols don't go anywhere near it."

"They definitely won't when they hear what happened," Tumbletail snorted.

"*Nothing* happened," Stripestar told him, fixing him with a stern gaze. "Understand? The last thing our Clanmates need is to be worrying about some creepy Twoleg on the prowl. So we'll keep this between the two of us."

Tumbletail dipped his head, considering. At last, he nodded. "Fine. Now can we get this fresh-kill back to camp? All the excitement has made me hungry."

Together they loped through the long grass, carrying their feeble haul in their mouths. *If only we'd caught that rat,* Stripestar thought. *Or a few of those squirrels in the Twoleg traps.*

He winced at a sudden pain in his flank. The rat bite was aching again, blood seeping through his fur. *I'll have Stoneflower take a look at it,* Stripestar promised himself.

As soon as they reached the camp, it was obvious that something was happening. Warriors huddled in small groups, murmuring in low, urgent voices. Apprentices scurried here and there, wide-eyed and anxious.

A strange, cold feeling took hold in Stripestar's belly.

Spotting their leader, Peaktail and Tinyclaw came hurrying over.

"Stripestar!" Tinyclaw gasped in relief. "Thank StarClan."

"What's the matter?" asked Stripestar.

"Nothing! I mean, nothing bad," Tinyclaw added quickly. "But it's happening. Right now! Galestar is having the kits!"

CHAPTER 21

Another yowl tore its way from deep inside Galestar.

She had barely recovered from the last wave of agony. But already another was building, rising, surging . . . then *crashing* through her, like the foaming swash of the water breaking against the shore.

How much longer? How much more can I stand? She didn't have an answer. She lay inside a cleft in the rock face, stranded on her nest of slippery green weed and feeling like rotten crow-food. A soft whimper escaped her with every breath as she panted, drawing as much air as she could into her heaving, breaking body.

"Easy . . . ," purred Goldenleaf at her side. She offered Galestar a wad of moss soaked in water to drink. "Let the pain carry you. Imagine you're a leaf drifting gently down a river."

Galestar snarled. "Easy for you to—" she began, but the words twisted into another howl as the pain came thrumming through her once more.

"You're doing well," Goldenleaf assured her as Galestar slumped back again, gasping. "Things are moving fast. It won't be long now."

Dimly, Galestar was aware of Stoneflower trotting up, holding something in his mouth. He passed it to Goldenleaf, who set it between Galestar's teeth—a strip of soft wood. "Bite hard," Goldenleaf told her. "It will help. Like last time."

Last time.

A flutter of panic passed through Galestar at the very thought. For a moon she had been doing all she could not to remember the last time. Had it felt the same way? Did it hurt more on that awful day back in the forest, or less? What had she done wrong? More questions without answers.

She felt suddenly very alone.

"Stripestar," she grunted. "Where is . . . Stripestar?"

A glance passed between Goldenleaf and Stoneflower, but neither cat replied.

The panic swirled and swelled up inside Galestar like a rising storm.

It's so hard here, in the sun-drown-place. What if the kits didn't make it? Or what if they did, but she couldn't nurse them properly? She could barely survive herself on the little scraps of fresh-kill the hunters had been able to bring back. Or what if—

Another wave of pain swept through her body, making her wail again. Her throat was raw from howling. Her jaw had clamped so tight around the wood that it had seized up. She was drained. She was aching. She was exhausted. And yet . . .

Today was the day. The day that she would meet her kits for the first time.

Her heart quickened. And when the agony came once

again, even quicker, shuddering right through her from head to tail-tip, she gave herself to it. *A leaf on the river,* she told herself. *I am a leaf on the river.*

"You can do it." Whose voice was that? It made her feel so calm and strong. "You can do it, Galestar, I know you can."

Stripestar!

Galestar's whole being flooded with love. Her mate was here with her in the little cave, his scent so familiar, so full of comfort. His amber eyes were shining with pride. *He believes in me.* Stripestar nuzzled at her flank, pressed his soft, warm pelt against hers, until Goldenleaf gently pushed him away.

"It's coming," the medicine cat purred. "The first kit."

No time to be afraid.

When the next wave came, Galestar pushed for all she was worth. *For Stripestar. For StormClan. For my kits.*

She screamed as the agony passed through her.

Then a weak little mew rose up. The softest, sweetest sound she had ever heard.

"A tom! A healthy tom!" Stripestar's voice shook with emotion. "Galestar, you've done it. Look! Do you see?"

Galestar's heart sang. *Pebblekit.* The name came to her at once. But she was already riding another pulse of pain that rippled down her flanks, and she pushed again, for all she was worth.

"Another kit," Goldenleaf meowed, urgently. "It's coming, Galestar. . . ."

Outside the nursery, the sky had darkened. The winds blew fiercely, and a light rain spotted the sand. But Galestar lay still

and peaceful at last, with the warm bundles of her healthy, happy kits curled up and sleeping at her belly.

Three of them. Just like the litter I lost.

It made Galestar tremble to think of it. She had never felt so strong before—nor so weak. *As though my heart were open to the world, for any cat to hurt.*

"*Pebblekit.* I like it," purred Stripestar. He lay close by, his loving gaze fixed on the sleeping litter. He had stayed with her in the little rocky cleft where they had made StormClan's nursery ever since the kits were born. "And the other tom . . . what do you think of *Thrushkit?*"

"It's perfect." Galestar sighed contentedly. "Which leaves the she-cat—and I have a name for her too."

"I'm listening."

Galestar gazed at him, feeling as though she might burst with love. "Fogkit," she murmured. "And I only hope that she will grow as wise and graceful as Fogdrift once was."

Stripestar hung his head. Galestar could see that his eyes were glittering as he struggled to contain his emotions. "Fogkit," he agreed in a hoarse whisper. "So . . . should we tell the Clan?"

A cloud darkened Galestar's joy at the mention of their Clanmates. "I suppose we should," she murmured. "I hope they'll be happy for us. But I have to warn you, they weren't too pleased to hear our plans to move on from this territory."

"I don't see what choice we have," Stripestar snorted. "What with the flooding and the terrible hunting."

"I think some of them *were* a little relieved," Galestar conceded. "And no cat actually argued. But we were so sure this

was the place for us. It doesn't feel good to have to set off yet again. Anyway." She waved a forepaw, batting the subject away like it was a troublesome gnat. "Speaking of hunting, what did you and Tumbletail bring back for us?"

"Not much. A shrew. A pair of mice." Stripestar looked oddly uncomfortable. Galestar noticed he was sitting in an awkward position. Then she noticed a ragged gash in his flank, glistening with blood, and her stomach lurched.

"What's that?" she gasped. "What happened?"

"Nothing," Stripestar mumbled. "Just a scratch from some Twoleg trash. Shall I call the Clan in now, to meet the kits?"

He's lying. Galestar knew it at once. Part of her wanted to press him on it, but Stripestar had already turned and slunk out of the cave. Besides, she didn't want to argue with him. Not right now.

Galestar heard a murmur of soft, excited meows outside the nursery. Then the first pair of warriors poked their heads in—Icefoot and Harewhisker, old Clanmates from WindClan. Her heart warmed to see them, and the way their eyes lit up when they looked at the kits.

No wonder, thought Galestar. She gazed at the litter herself, in awe. *Pebblekit. Thrushkit. Fogkit.* She could hardly believe how beautiful they were! Three soft, pink little creatures, so fragile and so helpless as they slumbered, so close she could feel every one of their tiny little breaths. Fogkit and Pebblekit each had a fine pelt of brown tabby fur, like Stripestar, while Thrushkit was black and white, like his mother. *I would do anything for them,* Galestar realized. *I'd give my own life for theirs.*

Outside the cave, she noticed Stripestar looking on with

pride as the warriors came and went, each dipping their head in to admire the newest additions to StormClan and congratulate their leaders. They really did seem delighted—as though the litter had somehow restored their faith in StormClan. Even Tumbletail leaned in close to softly nose Pebblekit's little head.

Maybe everything will be all right after all, Galestar thought. *Maybe our kits will change the Clan's fortunes for good.* And maybe they would look back on this day—the day their litter was born—as the day that things finally started going right for StormClan.

"Oh, by all the stars . . . what is it *this* time?" asked Galestar, her heart sinking.

Stripestar had just slipped through the rocky crevice that led to the nursery with a squirming Thrushkit held firmly in his mouth. "This little rascal's been at Stoneflower's herb store again," he explained once he'd deposited the naughty kit back onto the nest.

Galestar sighed heavily. "Well? And what do you have to say for yourself?"

Thrushkit buried his face in his forepaws. "I was just making a nest!" he squealed, his voice muffled. "And the lavender smelled so good . . . I wanted to use it all!"

Galestar only just managed to hold in the *mrrow* of laughter that threatened to bubble out of her. "Poor Stoneflower," she scolded Thrushkit, sounding as stern as she could manage. "I hope you apologized."

"I made sure of it," murmured Stripestar. "Next time he'll think twice before—yow!"

He leaped suddenly in the air, fur standing on end, and bumped his head on the rocky ceiling of the cave.

"Gotcha!" Fogkit had just pounced on his tail, trapping it with her tiny claws as though it were a mouse. "Delicious fresh-kill to go in my belly! Do you want some?" She nudged Stripestar's tail toward Galestar, offering it up like it was a tasty vole.

"I don't think she does," growled Stripestar, whipping his tail away.

"Mmm, I don't know about that," purred Galestar. "What do you think, kits? Shall we have your father's tail for dinner?"

"Yes!" squealed all three kits at once, and they fell on Stripestar, pouncing and pawing and clambering all over him while he rolled helpless on the ground.

"Mercy! I surrender! You're too strong for me!" whimpered Stripestar.

Galestar felt almost dizzy with love as she watched Pebblekit, Thrushkit, and Fogkit playing with her mate. And when she caught his eye, she gave him a nod: *It's time.* His eyes lit up, and he returned the nod.

"Come along, you three," Galestar murmured, picking the kits off their father one by one. "You're getting too big for the nursery now. So today we're going on an adventure."

Fogkit hopped from paw to paw, ears pricked, big eyes bulging with excitement. "You don't mean . . . ?"

"That's right," Galestar beamed. "We're going to leave the camp. It's time for you to see the sand that we've told you so much about."

"And the lake that never ends," added Stripestar. "But there's just one problem."

"What's that?" asked Pebblekit anxiously.

"You'll have to catch me first!"

With a great yowl, Stripestar sped out of the nursery, the three kits tumbling and racing after him.

Galestar followed slowly as they tore through the camp, startling warriors and apprentices and elders on all sides. Her body was healing well after the birth of the kits, but she didn't feel like running just yet. And besides, looking after the litter was exhausting work. If it wasn't the constant feeding, it was the sleepless nights. Not to mention the mischief they got up to when the sun had risen.

At the edge of the beach, Galestar found that the three little kittens had stopped, staring in astonishment at the water that stretched all the way out to the horizon. Galestar still found it an incredible sight herself. It was a clear day with not a drop of rain. The sky was bright white, and a few shafts of sunlight played on the water, making it sparkle like a thousand stars.

"Not bad, eh?" breathed Stripestar, gazing off into the distance. "Well, what are you waiting for? Go explore!"

Howling with delight, the kits hared off once again, heading for the water. Galestar settled down beside her mate, watching contentedly as the trio pranced and dashed around, shrieking excitedly at the way the water came rushing suddenly up the sand in a froth of white foam before retreating again.

"They've already grown so much," sighed Stripestar happily. "Can you believe it?"

"And yet they're still so small." Galestar cast a glance along the stretch of sand. In the distance, a Twoleg family was playing too, the kits digging in the sand while the adults sat huddled up, wrapped in strange Twoleg pelts. *Are they dangerous?* Galestar found herself wondering. *Everything* seemed dangerous since the kits had been born. But the Twolegs didn't seem interested in them at all.

The breeze was picking up, ruffling the cats' pelts. Galestar shivered. The air was getting colder as leaf-fall wore on. But for now, StormClan endured. She looked at Stripestar with love. Then she noticed the strange injury he had gotten that very same day that the kits were born. It had healed well, the fur almost covering it again.

But he never did explain how he got it.

Galestar found herself worrying again without quite knowing why. Stripestar was a brave, kind tom, and a fine father. And yet . . . sometimes he was so secretive. Why keep anything from her? Weren't they mates? Hadn't they given up everything for each other?

Up in the sky, a bank of clouds passed over the sun, and for just a moment the world was thrown into shadow.

Chapter 22

Some Twoleg had dropped something on the sand—a scrap of silvery paper, half buried and fluttering in the wind.

Stripestar didn't hold out much hope it would make for good eating. But when he got closer, he saw that some white substance clung to it, like thick milk smeared with mud. Cautiously he bent to lick it, then recoiled and spat it straight out again. *Disgusting!* It set his teeth on edge.

With a sigh, Stripestar left the trash and trudged onward through the long grass, licking his lips to try and rid himself of the sticky taste. How long had it been since he had feasted on a good rabbit? Or even a measly squirrel? *Or anything that's not crow-food dropped by Twolegs, or scrawny little rodents . . .*

They had all but given up on the gulls. The injuries weren't worth it, not for a bit of tough, stringy meat that tasted of fish. But the gulls kept coming, fighting StormClan for the Twoleg crow-food, diving down on the younger cats and sending them caterwauling and scurrying for cover.

Every time, it made Stripestar's heart stop with fear. He couldn't help thinking of Rainkit. There was no way in all of Silverpelt that he could let something like that happen again,

especially to one of his own kits. On one paw, he wanted them to have their freedom. But on the other paw, whenever the litter went out playing on the sand, he had to send several warriors to protect them.

Even now Stripestar could hear the gulls wheeling and squawking in the gray sky above. He shuddered. He was starting to dread the sound of their harsh cries.

Things will get better, he tried to tell himself. But he didn't believe it. Each day the winds blew colder and the skies grew darker. Fewer and fewer Twolegs ventured onto the sand, which meant less was being dropped. *Perhaps they travel away for leaf-bare, like birds?* Stripestar wondered.

"Stripestar!"

Startled, he turned to see Tumbletail approaching, pushing through the long, tough grass of the sandy hillocks with Swiftwing and Roughpelt on either side. Upwind of the patrol, he hadn't caught their scent. *I'm out of practice,* he thought gloomily. With so little prey to be found, he seemed to be losing his hunting ability altogether.

"Have you caught anything?" he asked without much hope.

"Not a toad," Tumbletail replied.

"We found a mouse," offered Roughpelt. "But it was dead. Crow-food."

Stripestar didn't know what to say. "We'd better head back to camp," he muttered at last.

There was a tightness in the air that was making Stripestar's whiskers tingle. A feeling he was starting to recognize. And together with the dark gray clouds rolling in above the endless lake, there was no doubt what was coming.

A storm. A bad one.

Stripestar made to move, but the three warriors stood their ground.

"Actually, Stripestar, I've been wanting to talk with you," Tumbletail meowed.

"So talk."

The three cats shared surreptitious glances, and a heavy feeling settled in Stripestar's belly. *What's going on?*

"The prey here," Tumbletail went on, carefully. "It doesn't just run poorly. It barely runs at all."

"We have to try something else!" Swiftwing begged. "Anything."

"And I've been thinking." Tumbletail drew himself up, looking coolly at Stripestar. "What do you say we try the carrionplace again?"

"Tumbletail says there are rats there," Roughpelt put in. "They might put up a fight, but there's good meat on them. There'll be Twoleg food, too. Maybe we could—"

"No!" snapped Stripestar. He arched his back, snarling at the warriors. Roughpelt and Swiftwing shrank back at once. Only Tumbletail didn't flinch. "I already told you," Stripestar growled. "We don't go to the carrionplace. Not anymore. It's too dangerous."

Tumbletail glared at him. For a heartbeat, Stripestar thought his neck fur was bristling. Then the warrior slouched, defeated. "Fine," he grunted. "You're the leader."

Stripestar's mood softened at once. *They're only hungry. Just like I am.* "It's true. I am leader, and if any cat is to go back to the carrionplace, it will be me. I won't let any other cat take

that risk. But we're not that desperate." *Not yet.* "Come on—back to the camp. We'll try again after sunhigh."

As they slipped through the long grass, the sky darkened. The wind picked up, rustling the grass and whipping foaming whitecaps across the endless lake. Stripestar began to feel scattered spots of rain dampen his pelt.

The storm's coming.

It made him feel weary more than anything. The thought of more floods, more dens washed away, more rebuilding . . . and yet more proof that they were in the wrong place.

Behind him, the hunting patrol was grumbling to one another, but he pretended not to hear. He had heard it all before. The only bright spot in all of this was that StormClan was finally coming around to their leaders' way of thinking. No cat wanted to stay here anymore. Not with this stormy leaf-fall and a leaf-bare that could very well be even worse.

Stripestar only hoped that his kits would be old enough to travel before the weather became unbearable.

He picked up the pace, trotting along. He wanted to get back to the camp before the rain fell any harder. But as they came down off the slopes and onto the sand beside the lake, he stopped dead, frozen, staring at something in his path.

Swiftwing bumped into him and yelped with surprise.

"What's the matter?" asked Roughpelt.

Stripestar didn't reply. His gaze was fixed on the curious object that he'd almost trodden on. It lay there in the sand, half buried, but not enough to obscure its strange shape. It was as orange as sundown and covered in little white bumps.

It had five legs, like the petals of a flower, but it smelled like nothing so much as a fish.

A fish with legs.

Stripestar's stomach dropped. His blood ran cold.

High above, a gull gave a long, mournful shriek, and when Stripestar jerked his head up, he saw it wheeling white against a black cloud. He turned, dreading to look. But there it was, stark against the distant horizon—the fox-headed mountain where they had tried to make their home.

I've seen this before. All of it.

They were the very same images from the dream he'd had so long ago by the mysterious pool of water where they had camped after leaving the mountains of the Tribe. Except now it wasn't a dream. Now it was real.

The words of Stoneteller came back to him, ringing and echoing within his mind, as loudly and clearly as if the slim silver cat were sitting right at his side.

I have seen it in the moon-touched water—the place where the land falls away. Here begins the lake without end. It is a place of dangers.

Do not end your journey there.

But that was exactly what they had done.

"Can we eat it?" asked Tumbletail, sniffing at the strange flower-like fish and prodding it gingerly with a forepaw.

"Urgh!" Swiftwing grimaced. "You first."

Stripestar was hardly listening. *The prophecy is coming true.* Which meant only one thing.

They had to leave this place. They had to leave it now. *Today.*

"Come on!" he yowled over his shoulder. And he took off

at once, bounding across the sand toward StormClan's camp, leaving the patrol stunned and confused behind him.

He found his Clanmates busily securing their nests as best they could while the kits ran around getting under every cat's paws and mewing excitedly at the threatening skies. *They don't realize how dangerous these storms can be,* thought Stripestar. And wasn't that exactly what Stoneteller had told them? *There is a darkness in your future, Clan cats. A storm is coming.*

"Galestar!" His mate looked startled as he lurched toward her, wide eyed, heart pounding. "We have to talk. Tinyclaw, you too!"

Galestar cocked her head. "But—"

"Now!"

Stripestar led the puzzled cats away from the rest of the warriors to a patch of sand hidden from the camp behind a heap of rocks. Overhead, the clouds had turned heavy and black.

"Listen," Stripestar meowed when Galestar and Tinyclaw had caught up with him. "I think this storm's going to be bad. *Really* bad. I think we should abandon the camp, set out, and get the Clan to higher ground."

"Whoa—slow down!" Galestar purred. "What's gotten into you, Stripestar? We've weathered storms before. Of course we'll leave this place—we've agreed that. But not yet. The kits are too small. When they've grown stronger, then we can—"

"By then it will be too late!" Stripestar exploded. "We have to go now, before—"

"Stripestar!" Galestar snapped. She narrowed her blue eyes, peering at him with bewilderment—and with anger. "What are you talking about? Start at the beginning. We have to go before *what*?"

Stripestar opened his mouth, then shut it again. He didn't know what to tell her. She had heard Stoneteller's prophecy, but he'd kept his dream from her. He'd been happy to stay here. He didn't know where to begin.

Tinyclaw had been listening anxiously, eyes darting between the two leaders. Now, at last, she spoke. "Is this about your dream?" she asked Stripestar quietly.

"What dream?" Galestar looked from Stripestar to Tinyclaw, then back again.

"It's . . . well . . . ," stammered Stripestar.

"You've seen it, haven't you?" Tinyclaw pressed him. "The fish with legs?"

Stripestar hung his head. "And the white gull flying against a black sky," he muttered.

He glanced up at Galestar. To his horror, he saw that she was quivering with rage. "Let me explain," he meowed, quickly. "It was the night we slept beside the pool of water—the one the medicine cats told us was . . . special. I had a dream that *wasn't* a dream. It was a warning, I'm sure of it. Now the dream's coming true, and—"

"Wait," growled Galestar. Her voice was low and dangerous, and she glared at him with ice in her eyes. "I remember that night. I knew something was wrong. And I asked you what had happened, but you wouldn't answer me. Now you're

trying to tell me you had a dream that warned us something terrible was going to happen. You had it moons ago. And you kept it to *yourself?*"

"I didn't!" Stripestar replied before he could help himself.

"Oh, that's right . . . it's even worse. You told Tinyclaw! Your old friend from ThunderClan." Galestar's voice was rising to a snarl. She arched her back and Stripestar found himself tensing, afraid that she might actually strike him. "But you didn't tell *me*, did you?" Galestar went on. "Your mate. The leader of StormClan. And everything that's happened since then . . . Mudsplash, and Rainkit, all this pain and suffering . . . Now I find out we could have turned back and avoided it all! Stars above! Why in the name of *Silverpelt* didn't you *tell* me, Stripestar?"

Stripestar's legs felt weak. He was unsteady on his paws. He shrank back, feeling like a kit being scolded by an elder. He had never seen Galestar so furious before—not with *any* cat—and it frightened him. "I didn't know if the dream really meant anything," he mumbled. "Not for sure . . . And I was going to tell you, I swear it. As soon as I saw any of the signs from the dream in the waking world, that's when I planned to—"

"You deceived me," yowled Galestar. "And now you think I'll roll over so you can have your way? I don't think so."

"But—"

"No!" she hissed. "My kits are too small to leave now. They're still nursing! I won't put them in danger because of your foolishness. We stay."

A silence stretched between the three cats. Tinyclaw cringed, head bowed, looking as though she wanted to be anywhere else but here.

Gazing into the fearsome blue eyes of his mate, her neck fur bristling, Stripestar was reminded horribly of that greenleaf day so many moons ago when he and Galestar had led their Clans against each other on the moor.

Not since that day had Galestar felt so much like an enemy.

"But you don't understand . . . ," Stripestar mewed softly. "It's for the kits that I'm doing this. I'm worried about them, Galestar. Please . . . we have to leave before something terrible happens. While the Clan will still follow us. While we still *have* a Clan."

"You're asking my permission now, are you?" spat Galestar. "If you'd shared your secrets with me, Stripestar, you wouldn't have to."

She let out a long, slow sigh. Suddenly she looked drained, as though the rage had leaked out and left her utterly exhausted. She dipped her head, and Stripestar's heart ached at how she wouldn't meet his eye.

"Do what you like," Galestar shrugged, at last. "But I won't lead our Clan away from this place because of some dream you had so long ago. A dream you kept to yourself. I'm going to wait until my kits are strong enough to travel."

Galestar turned and padded slowly back to camp through a haze of drizzle.

As Stripestar watched her go, he felt as though his heart

was breaking. *My kits,* again. Not *our kits.* He could hardly believe those words had escaped her mouth.

He had lost the argument, of course. But now an even worse fear had taken hold, chilling him to the bone. A fear that the argument wasn't all that he had lost.

In the distance, thunder rolled.

Chapter 23

Lightning flashed. For a heartbeat, every nook and crevice of the nursery cave was picked out in cold white light. The thunder came rumbling after, growling like an angry dog. All three kits whimpered and wriggled up closer to Galestar's breast.

"It's all right," she murmured softly. "You're safe with me." She snuggled with them in her nest of weeds, curling her tail around the little creatures and holding them tight. In truth, she wasn't sure if she was comforting them or if it was the other way around.

Her rage had faded away at long last, like a forest fire burning itself into nothing. Now Galestar was left only with the cold ashes of her sorrow and her hurt.

How could he?

They'd agreed to be partners. *Equals.* Now Galestar understood at last that she had been seeing things differently from Stripestar. Perhaps she always had. Because apparently, he trusted Tinyclaw, of all cats, more than her.

To make matters worse, she couldn't ignore his dream. She had been so furious with Stripestar for not sharing it with her. But it didn't mean that he was wrong about it. Perhaps it really

was a warning. Was she doing the right thing, insisting on staying here?

Pebblekit squirmed, trying to get comfortable, and Galestar realized that her muscles had tensed up from her anxious thoughts. She forced herself to relax, trying to communicate with her body as well as her words. *You're safe. Everything's fine.*

Another flash of lightning and another crack of thunder. The kits flinched. Rain was hammering down now, beating the rocks outside the nursery and flecking Galestar's face with raindrops, even inside.

It's getting worse. She couldn't deny it. And as the afternoon slid into evening, it was getting darker out there too, as though night had already fallen.

"What's a storm?" asked Thrushkit nervously.

"Is it like a monster?" Fogkit wanted to know.

"Not at all," Galestar purred. "It's not nearly as dangerous. This is only a bit of bad weather. It'll blow over soon, I'm sure."

She had barely finished speaking when the wind whipped up again, lashing rain straight into the cave mouth and spattering the squealing kits with droplets. Somewhere overhead, Galestar heard a scraping and skidding of stones tumbling down the rock face that rose from their camp, all dislodged by the storm. She could almost feel the cave shuddering around them.

Not for the first time, a queasy feeling stirred in Galestar's gut. *I don't like this.* Every time it seemed as though the storm might let up, it only grew more fierce.

"Eeeek!" screamed Fogkit, leaping nearly out of her skin. "I'm wet!"

Glancing up, Galestar felt her heart quicken. Water was seeping from the top of the cave, dripping down onto their heads in fat, cold drops.

A panicked thought struck her. *What if the cave fills up with water?* None of her kits could swim. Not even *she* could swim. And if they were getting wet, even in the nursery, she dreaded to think how soaked and miserable the rest of the Clan would be getting outside.

Another flash of lightning illuminated the cave floor, and Galestar's heart lurched. The light reflected off little pools of water that were gathering among the rocks. *It's happening already,* she realized. *The nursery is flooding!*

Galestar rose unsteadily to her paws as the thunder rolled. "Come with me," she murmured, as gently as she could.

"Why? What's wrong?" asked Pebblekit, his voice trembling. "I thought we were safe here."

"We *are* safe," Galestar told him. "Just as long as you all stay close to me, whatever happens. Understand?"

Three little heads dipped in nervous agreement.

Breathing deep and trying not to let her worry show, Galestar ushered her kits out of the cave mouth and into the howling darkness outside.

Rain showered down, drenching them within heartbeats. Wind thrashed at their wet pelts. Thrushkit yelped. Fogkit whimpered. All three kits cowered, helpless in the face of the storm. They shivered like leaves, their whiskers drooping, heavy with raindrops.

"This way," Galestar guided them. "Watch your step. Remember—you're safe with me."

Slowly, cautiously, she led her litter across the slippery rocks, down into the middle of the camp. Here and there she saw cats curled up, shuddering wretchedly underneath what little shelter was available—a few fronds of weed, a chunk of damp wood, an overhanging ledge of rock. None of it provided nearly enough cover. The rain pitted the sand, soaking it and churning it into a swampy expanse that reminded Galestar uncomfortably of the marshland where they'd tried and failed to make a home for themselves.

"Stripestar!" she yowled. "Where is Stripestar?"

Her cry was lost in the roar of the wind and the constant pounding of the rain. Then she saw him, crouched low beside a boulder and muttering urgently with Tinyclaw—*who else?*—his fur dark and wet and so stuck to his body that he looked as skinny as a young apprentice. His amber eyes flashed with alarm when he spotted her and the kits.

"Galestar! What are you doing out here? I thought . . . Shouldn't you be in the nursery?"

No time to explain. Especially not with the kits listening in.

"We should go," Galestar told him briskly. "We need to climb the rocks. Get away from the lake."

A confusing mixture of emotions seemed to flit across Stripestar's face. Galestar felt her smoldering anger flare briefly once again. *Don't you dare say I told you so. . . .* But Stripestar managed to hold his tongue. Instead he simply nodded and scampered away to round up their Clanmates.

Hopping up onto the boulder, Galestar narrowed her eyes to peer through the haze of rain. To her horror, she saw that the level of the endless lake had risen, the water surging up to cover almost all the sand. There was no route to safety that way. And the alternative was hardly better: clambering across rocks slick with rain, with a horrifying drop toward the foaming, angry waters of the lake for any cat who slipped.

But what choice do we have?

Glancing back, Galestar saw that the Clan was gathering and milling around below, all wide-eyed with fear, shivering with cold, and barely able to stand on the sinking wet sand that had been their camp. Pebblekit, Thrushkit, and Fogkit gazed up at their mother, looking as helpless and vulnerable as they had on the day they were born.

They're relying on me to save them, thought Galestar. *The whole Clan is.*

"Follow me!" she screeched into the swirling storm. "All of you . . . this way!"

They set off, scrambling across the stony ridges close to the edge of the lake and following the line of the shore away from the sand.

Galestar led them. Her paws were soon aching from the sharp, jagged rocks, but she forced herself to take her time, so as not to slip. All the while she kept talking to her kits, who came close behind. She tried to keep her voice as calm and reassuring as she possibly could. She pointed out just where to put each paw. She warned them of treacherous patches that were slick with green weeds. And she told them, over and over

again, that they were safe. That everything was going to be all right.

She only wished she believed it herself.

The storm seemed to blow more savagely all the time. Lightning flashed, thunder rolled, and great gusts of rain swept across them until they were all soaked to the skin. In the darkness and the driving rain, Galestar couldn't see more than a fox-length in front of her, and there was no telling if the whole Clan was managing to stick together. She was so cold that her tail had gone numb. Her paws too. *Everything.*

"I'm scared!" wailed Fogkit.

"Are we nearly there?" squeaked Thrushkit desperately.

"Nearly," Galestar soothed him.

But she didn't know where *there* was. She kept scouring all around, trying to spot somewhere that might offer shelter. There was nothing. They were exposed to the elements, trapped by the raging lake on one side and the endless slippery rocks on the other. *All we can do is push on.*

From behind, Galestar caught a tom's cry half snatched away by the wind. It was Stripestar, calling to the elders—urging them onward. She heard a yowl and a scraping of dislodged scree, as though some cat had slipped. But there was no time to check and see who it was, or if they were all right.

The wind was the worst thing of all. One moment it seemed to disappear entirely. The next it was viciously shoving at their flanks, knocking every cat off course. *As if it isn't hard enough to stay upright on the wet rocks!* thought Galestar.

A cracking sounded from above, then a rumbling of rocks and stones, bouncing down from higher up the rock face.

"Look out!" yowled some cat.

A shriek pierced the air—a shriek that was horribly familiar.

Whirling round, Galestar's stomach lurched to see Thrushkit stumbling. He was holding one paw clear of the ground, and blood was soaking fast through the fur of his foreleg. He looked wild-eyed with terror.

"A rock hit him!" shouted Fogkit. "I don't like this! Make it stop! Please . . ."

The kits were all wailing now, driven to distraction by the cold and the fear. Galestar felt despair swirling up inside, threatening to overwhelm her.

Then she saw something, lit up for a heartbeat in a flash of lightning. A large, overhanging ledge, not far off. And beneath it, a patch of dry rock that looked big enough for the Clan. *Safety.* At least for now.

"StormClan!" Galestar screamed. "With me!"

Picking up Thrushkit in her mouth as though he were a newborn kit, Galestar struggled onward. It was even harder going with the extra weight, and it threw her off balance besides. But she hopped from rock to rock, heart racing, until at last she reached the dry patch of ground beneath the ledge and could set the injured kit down gently. Quickly she checked his wound, and relief flooded her as she saw that it wasn't deep. *With Goldenleaf's help, he should soon heal.*

Turning back, Galestar ushered Pebblekit and Fogkit to

safety first, followed by the rest of the Clan as they came in one by one. She counted them off in her head to make sure they were all there. Nettlesting had slipped and gotten a scratch on her flank. Roughpelt had stepped on a sharp rock and had a bleeding paw. But apart from that, all of them had made it safely to the shelter.

Galestar could hardly believe it. She was exhausted and drenched and fearful. *But we did it. We survived the storm.*

So why didn't she feel happy?

Last to arrive were Tinyclaw and Stripestar. As her mate slunk in, looking like a drowned rat, Galestar muttered a few words to him. "You were right."

He flinched, as though her voice had stung him. *Or perhaps he's just surprised?* Either way, he didn't look at her. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, we have to leave this place," Galestar replied, speaking quietly so the other cats couldn't hear. "It's leaf-fall, so the storms are only going to get worse. And we have to think of the whole Clan. Not just the kits. We can't wait until they've grown bigger and stronger."

Stripestar nodded. He had won the argument after all, but he didn't seem pleased. Just tired. Defeated. Then his eyes widened as his gaze fell on Thrushkit. "Stars above! Is he—"

"He's fine," Galestar interrupted. "Or at least he will be. I'll have the medicine cats take a look. But I'm guessing it will be a while before he can walk properly."

"So until then, we're stuck here?"

Galestar could only shrug.

She turned and padded back to the kits, leaving her mate to his own gloomy thoughts. There was a sandy hollow toward the rear of the overhang that would do as a nest for tonight. Galestar gathered her litter and curled up there, trying to share her damp body's meager warmth with the kits.

For a long while she lay shivering, cold and lonely. She had never been so tired yet so unable to sleep. And from time to time, she cast a glance at the tom she had thought she had known so well, where he lay alone on the other side of the ledge, gazing out as the storm lashed at the endless lake.

Who had he been, this whole time?

Could she ever learn to trust him again?

CHAPTER 24

Today is the day, thought Stripestar grimly.

The dark clouds still hovered ominously overhead, and a thin drizzle dappled the restless waters of the endless lake, but the worst of the storm had finally blown over. For two whole days it had raged, keeping the StormClan cats trapped beneath the great overhanging slab of rock. Now at last they had a chance to leave. *And not a moment too soon.* Every cat was cold and jittery and hungry.

Of all the spots they had chosen to camp, thought Stripestar, this might have been the very worst. Still, he did his best to sound cheerful as he went around, rousing the warriors and gathering the apprentices. Galestar was already forming them into a rough line, ready for travel.

"Come on." Stripestar nudged Pebblekit and Fogkit out of their nest, guiding the still-sleepy kits toward the middle of the line. "You don't want to be left behind, do you?"

"But where are we *going*?" Pebblekit demanded through a yawn.

Anywhere that's not here, thought Stripestar. "Somewhere safe," he promised. "With sunshine and soft grass and plenty

of prey to hunt. You'll see, little ones. The world is bigger than you could ever imagine. And more wonderful, besides."

The kits pricked up their ears and leaped excitedly.

Stripestar only wished he felt as hopeful himself. Because hadn't he told Galestar the very same thing, all those seasons past, on the night they first met? He had believed it then. *But now . . .* Now he wasn't so sure. The world that StormClan had found beyond the forest was vast and strange. But most of all, it was cruel.

Stripestar felt so tired.

Galestar had lain flat on her belly so that Thrushkit could scramble onto her back. Stripestar winced at the sight of the kit's injured foreleg. The medicine cats had applied a poultice using what few herbs they had left, and the injury was healing well. But the little kit looked somehow smaller and weaker than ever—as though the slightest breeze might blow him away.

"Now, you take good care of your mother," Stripestar told Thrushkit sternly. "Make sure she doesn't fall."

Thrushkit's eyes lit up with purpose. "Don't worry," he whispered. "You're safe with me, Galestar."

Galestar let out a soft snort of amusement. "I'm glad to hear that. And you two, stay close to me, understand?"

"We will!" Pebblekit and Fogkit chorused.

Stripestar shot Galestar a furtive glance. But of course, she wasn't looking at him. She hadn't looked at him in days.

"I'll . . . go to the front," he mumbled. "Make sure we're heading in the right direction."

"I think that's for the best," Galestar replied. Her voice was cold. And still she didn't meet his eyes.

Hanging his head, Stripestar padded away to the head of the line. The whole Clan looked dejected, their pelts still stiff and damp with rainwater that had never quite dried out. *We've been here before,* thought Stripestar. *So many times.* Another camp abandoned. Another uncertain path ahead.

"Is every cat ready?" called Stripestar as he took up position in the lead.

A murmur of agreement rose from his Clanmates.

"Then let's go," Galestar cried. "StormClan . . . onward!"

They set out, traveling under the open sky once again: a bedraggled line of cats, their pelts the only smears of color to be seen as they scrambled across the gray rocks, with the gray lake to one side and gray clouds high above their ears.

The drizzle kept falling, making the rocks glisten treacherously. It kept their fur damp and forced Stripestar to squint as it pattered against his face. As the morning wore on, they made slow progress, going only as fast as the weakest elders. *Nearly sunhigh,* thought Stripestar. But the sun was nowhere to be seen.

At last, Stripestar found a route inland, away from the endless lake. He had a feeling he wouldn't be missing that sickeningly vast expanse of water. But the route was hard. It meant climbing over bigger and bigger boulders, and the slope became rapidly steeper, so steep it reminded Stripestar of the mountains. No cat spoke as they panted, clambering with difficulty across the slippery rocks. They were moving upward through a narrow ravine, with sheer rock faces on either side.

The wind had begun to pick up. Every so often the cats had to stop, clinging to the rocks for dear life as sudden gusts came sweeping in, threatening to throw them off balance. The haze of drizzle became more insistent. Soon it turned to proper rain, and Stripestar could feel his fur sticking to his body, just as it had on that awful night the storm had begun.

He tried to check on Galestar and the kits, but they'd fallen farther back in the line, and he could only see a glimpse of them. He could just make out the bobbing black-and-white head of Galestar as she moved from rock to rock, and the bundle of black-and-white fur that was Thrushkit, holding on to her back. There were Pebblekit and Fogkit too, sticking close to their mother's heels, just as they'd been told. But it was getting harder to see them. Stripestar's pelt prickled with unease.

The rain became a downpour. And now the visibility was worse—much worse. Stripestar could barely see a tail-length in front of him.

"We need to stop!" he yowled. But his cry was snatched away by the howling wind and the spattering rain.

The sky darkened. Thunder rolled.

Then, quite suddenly, the storm broke with the ferocity of a snapping dog.

The rain came down in a savage deluge that soaked every cat within a heartbeat. Lightning flashed, then faded to leave a darkness that was almost like night. The thunder that followed was so loud and long that it made Stripestar cringe, and several cats yowled out loud with shock.

"Galestar!" Stripestar screamed. "Galestar, where are you?"

He found it difficult to see beyond his own forepaws now.

"Stay together!" he yelled helplessly.

A hideous cracking sounded from higher up, followed by the noise of falling rocks—big ones—dislodged by the storm, rattling, tumbling down the hillside.

A screech made Stripestar jerk his head to one side, just in time to see Spotnose sliding away, hind paws skidding on scree. She clawed wildly at the air, howled once more, then careered over a ledge and out of sight.

"Spotnose!" Stripestar leaped toward the cat, his heart lurching. Berryfall emerged from the blur of rain, leaping from rock to rock. *She must have heard it too.*

As they reached the ledge, they saw Spotnose a few tail-lengths below, clinging with her forepaws to a gnarly old root that poked out from between some stones. Her hind legs were dangling wildly above a stomach-churning drop. "Help!" Spotnose squealed. "Please . . ."

Rosebush. The memory came flashing violently through Stripestar's mind.

Without a second thought, he slid down the stony slope and set his shoulder to Spotnose's flank, heaving for all he was worth. In the space of a breath, Berryfall was there too, on the other side.

"You can do it," Stripestar growled. "Come *on*, Spotnose!"

Wriggling and writhing, the warrior managed to heave herself back onto solid ground. She hunched, gasping for air, terror still etched all over her face.

No time to celebrate.

"We have to get back to the others." Stripestar had to yell to make himself heard above the pounding din of the rain and the roar of the wind.

Wet and shivering, the three cats climbed as fast they could to where they had left the group.

The Clan had already moved on. But they followed, desperately struggling through the merciless wind and rain, until, with a rush of relief, Stripestar saw the dim shapes of the other cats, shadowy forms amid the maelstrom. They had stopped on a wide, flat plateau to catch their breath. The top of the hill was just visible, not much higher up.

Stripestar scoured the assembled cats, and his stomach pitched. He felt suddenly light-headed.

"Where are they?" he asked.

Tumbletail scowled in confusion. "Where's who?"

"Galestar! The kits! Who saw them last?"

"They were right behind me." With her fur darkened by rain, Hazelfrond's green eyes looked huge and terrified. "And then . . . then they weren't."

Stripestar leaped up onto a rock. "Has any cat seen Galestar?" he shouted over the raging storm. "Answer me! Now!"

No cat replied.

Frantically, Stripestar scurried around the edge of the plateau, trying to pierce the haze of rain with his gaze. *Where are you?*

"I can't see them anywhere," murmured Tinyclaw, appearing at his side. "What do we do?"

"What do we *do*?" Stripestar snarled, rounding furiously

on his deputy. "We *find* them! Send out patrols! Do whatever it takes."

Obediently, Tinyclaw hurried away, dividing the Clan into groups. Stripestar couldn't wait another heartbeat. "Berryfall! Spotnose! With me." He set off downhill, without waiting to see if they followed.

Panicked thoughts buzzed around his brain like bees as he slipped and slid across the rocks, hardly watching his paw steps. What if they had been hit by a falling rock? Or maybe they'd found a good place to shelter? Or what if they'd slipped on wet mud and gone tumbling down toward the endless lake? "No," he gasped out loud. "No, it can't be. It can't . . ."

Time seemed to stretch and contract all at once. Stripestar peered under ledges, down gullies, heaved rocks aside. He was dimly aware of Berryfall and Spotnose close by, searching too. Every moment he expected to hear the frightened mew of one of the kits. Or Galestar's voice, the voice he loved more than any other, calling out to him.

Stripestar! I'm here! I'm safe!

But there was nothing. Only the wind and the rain and the cruel, barren emptiness of the rocky hillside.

"They must be somewhere!" he yelped desperately. "They couldn't have just vanished!"

Neither Berryfall nor Spotnose made any reply.

As the wind fell, for just a moment, Stripestar thought he heard something. A distant wail. A high, keening sound. "There!" he shouted, wild with fear. "Did you hear that?"

"I think it was the wind," mumbled Spotnose. "Whistling through a crack."

Stripestar wanted to deny it, but he knew she was right. And though he stood still, listening, straining his ears harder than he ever had before, the sound didn't come again.

They're gone.

The thought sank into him, turning his heart to stone. Dragging him downward with it.

The three of them had been the first patrol to leave the plateau, but when they got back, Stripestar saw that they were the last to return. No cat had to speak. He could read the truth in their hunched shoulders and their hanging heads. *They couldn't find them.*

Impossibly, the rain fell harder. It stung Stripestar, as though the sky were hurling pebbles down on StormClan. *Hail,* he realized. Ice skittered and bounced off the plateau, battering the miserable cats without mercy.

What now? No cat uttered it, but Stripestar could feel the unspoken question in the air.

"Stripestar?" murmured Tinyclaw gently.

He raised a forepaw to silence her, and the she-cat shut her mouth. He knew what she was about to tell him. *The Clan can't stay here.* Any longer, and every cat would be in peril.

They had to go. They had to leave.

Without Galestar.

Without our kits.

"Maybe they've found a place to shelter," Tinyclaw muttered. "You know Galestar. She's strong. She's invincible."

Stripestar didn't reply. He knew that Tinyclaw was only telling him what he wanted to hear. But he wanted to believe it, so badly . . . And still the hail kept falling, pelting the hunched, frightened cats. Sooner or later some cat would slip and fall, like Rosebush had. Or the cold would get deep into their bones and make them ill. *Or both.*

"The storm is getting worse!" Spotnose cried out. "It's now or never! Stay, and we all die."

"I can't leave without Galestar and my kits!" Stripestar insisted.

"We can come back for them!" Tinyclaw assured him. "But we have to go now!"

Stripestar said nothing for a long moment, fighting hard to keep his worst fears at bay. Finally, he flicked his tail in assent, leaving it to his deputy to round up the cats.

As Tinyclaw led StormClan, scrambling up toward the hilltop, Stripestar remained at the very edge of the plateau and stared out into the vicious ice storm, his fur streaming around him. Right until the very last moment he waited. Until the last of the cats had moved on, and he was alone, and to stay any longer would be to lose the rest of the Clan entirely.

I'll find you, Galestar, he promised silently. Then he turned and followed, sunk deep in dejection.

Stripestar barely noticed how long it took to reach the top of the hill, to trudge on through wet grass until they found a little copse where the Clan could take shelter beneath a huge, fallen oak tree. His thoughts whirled like the swirling gusts of hail, leading nowhere. His family was gone. Worse still, he

had abandoned them. *I didn't have a choice,* he told himself. But it didn't make him feel any better.

He could sense Tinyclaw watching him anxiously all the while. But the she-cat didn't breathe a word, and Stripestar was glad of it.

It was agony not to know. *Are they lost? Are they suffering? Are they dead?*

All night long, Stripestar sat beneath the dripping tree trunk while his Clanmates slumbered, watching the storm with an unblinking gaze and tormenting himself with questions that he had no way of answering.

"Wake up. Stripestar, wake up!"

Stripestar snorted, rolled over, and blinked. *Tinyclaw's voice.* He was wet from head to tail-tip and lying on dew-damp grass. Bright morning sunshine streamed through his eyelids, making him groan and cover his eyes with his forelegs.

Then he remembered.

He rolled and sprang up, his sleepiness gone in an instant. He cursed himself. *Must have dropped off after all. . . .*

"Stripestar?" Tinyclaw butted him gently with her head. "It's gone. The storm's blown over."

"What? What do you . . . ?" Then his heart leaped. *It's true!* Peering out from under the shelter of the tree trunk, Stripestar saw that the sky was a clear blue, with not a cloud in sight. As though the past few days had only been a nightmare and not real.

"Tumbletail!" Stripestar shouted. "Frecklepelt! With me!"

Half the Clan was still asleep, exhausted from their efforts to escape the storm. A few grumbled and turned away at their leader's cry. But Tumbletail and Frecklepelt came trotting over, bright-eyed and ready.

"Maybe we should take this slowly?" Tinyclaw suggested, looking nervous as usual. "We could organize some patrols, perhaps hunt first, then—"

"We're going *now*," Stripestar snarled. "I won't wait another heartbeat. You're in charge until we get back. Understand?"

The deputy reluctantly dipped her head, apparently unwilling to argue.

Stripestar wasted no more time. He set out at a run, with Tumbletail and Frecklepelt following at his heels. They darted across a stretch of wet grass, stopping only when they reached the top of the rocky slope they had scaled the night before, which led down toward the endless lake.

In spite of everything, the view took Stripestar's breath away. The distant waters sparkled like countless stars in the morning light. The sand shone, the rocks seemed to glisten with moisture, and the long grass swayed in a gentle breeze as though dancing.

The sun-drown-place looked more beautiful than Stripestar had ever seen it before, and a dark thought took hold of him. *It's as though StarClan is mocking me.* Because this glorious sunshine seemed crueler by far than the raging storm of the night before.

"Galestar!" Stripestar howled. "Galestaaaaaaarr!" But there was no reply. "Start searching," he muttered over his shoulder.

The three cats set out, clambering down across the rocks and scouring every gap, every crevice, every hidden drop. *This should be easy,* Stripestar thought desperately. The night before they'd hardly been able to see three fox-lengths for the driving rain and hail. Now the whole hillside was picked out clearly in bright light.

But Galestar and the kits were nowhere to be seen.

"Pebblekit!" yowled Frecklepelt.

"Fogkit!" called Tumbletail. "Thrushkit!"

The rocks just echoed their cries back at them.

Stripestar remembered the moment when the wind had dropped in the middle of the storm, and he could have sworn he'd heard a muffled mewling sound. How absurd that seemed to him now. Of course it had only been his imagination playing tricks on him. *Or worse—StarClan's idea of a joke.*

He scrabbled at a pile of scree, until his paws were cracked and bleeding. But he could only unearth more stones.

As long as they found no bodies, Stripestar could still allow himself to feel a faint glimmer of hope. *But perhaps they fell into the lake. Perhaps they were washed away. Perhaps they drowned.*

His heart throbbed with pain. His eyes felt hot and prickly, and exhaustion slowly crept into his weary limbs. He didn't want to see them dead. But he had to know.

He crossed to the edge of a precipice and looked down, dreading to see four broken bodies far below . . . but there was only more sand. More rocks.

"Maybe . . . the rockslide?" muttered Frecklepelt, as though unwilling to say more.

Stripestar had thought of it already—the moment when the rocks had come tumbling down, dislodged by the storm. So many, so big and heavy that they could easily have crushed a cat beneath. *Or a she-cat and her litter.*

He had imagined his family killed in so many different ways.

But if that really had happened, what could they do about it? These boulders were huge, far too big for any cat to shift. Even a whole Clan working together. And where would they even start looking?

Stripestar slumped down, defeated. He rested his head on his forepaws, looking out across the unending waters. Lying still at last.

"Er . . . Stripestar?" murmured Frecklepelt.

"What now?" asked Tumbletail.

He wasn't listening. *They're dead. They really are.* It was too big, too awful to believe. But what other choice did he have?

His gaze fell on a gull perched down on a rock by the shore and picking at something in the sand. A cold feeling crept across his pelt. *You knew,* the gull seemed to be telling him. *You dreamed that this would happen. That disaster was upon you.*

And you led StormClan straight into it.

If only he had told Galestar right away that morning after the dream. If only they had never come here. If only he had tried to persuade her not to leave their camp when the storm first broke . . .

But he hadn't done any of those things, and now Galestar and Pebblekit and Thrushkit and Fogkit had paid the price for it.

Because of me.

Slowly, Stripestar rose to his paws. He felt unsteady. He felt dizzy with grief.

"Stripestar!" cried Tumbletail.

He focused his gaze on his two companions at last. They were still waiting for an answer. *What now?*

There were only two choices—and one of them was unbearable.

"We keep looking," grunted Stripestar.

Chapter 25

Thrushkit wriggled on Galestar's back, trying to get comfortable and nearly throwing her off balance. "Whoa!" Galestar gasped, almost slipping on a wet boulder. The kit had seemed so light at first, barely a burden at all. *Not anymore.*

The drizzle was falling harder now, turning to rain as they climbed the rocky hillside, and a strange foreboding stirred deep in Galestar's heart.

Glancing back, she saw to her relief that Pebblekit and Fogkit were following close beside her, just as she'd told them to. StormClan was strung out in a line ahead of them, their pelts little smudges of color among a grim landscape of unending gray—rocks, sea, and sky alike—as they scaled the slope.

With awful speed, the storm broke. The rain turned to a deluge. The wind howled, the thunder boomed, and the kits all squealed at once.

"I want to go home!

"What's happening? I don't like it!"

"Galestar? Help us, please!"

They all quailed as more deafening thunder rolled out

across the shore. And suddenly Fogkit bolted, scampering across the rocks and wailing with terror.

"Stay with me!" Galestar caterwauled, but the words were lost at once in the raging storm. "Come back!" She leaped desperately from rock to rock, still bearing Thrushkit. The little tom squealed and nearly went tumbling, and Galestar had to hoick him back into position. A fox-length later and she finally caught up with Fogkit. She heaved her up by the scruff of her neck and dumped her onto a flat ledge.

"Don't do that again!" Galestar scolded her kit, unable to keep the anger from her voice. "Never! You frightened me!"

"I'm sorry," Fogkit cringed.

That was when Galestar noticed. *Pebblekit . . . Where's Pebblekit?*

The sky had turned dark. The rain fell so hard, she could hardly see a thing.

She set off once more, heart pounding, forcing herself to move slowly so that Fogkit could keep pace, and yowling out the name of her missing kit. "Pebblekit! Pebblekit, where are you!"

Just as her fear was curdling into despair, a little shadow came looming out of the storm, ears flattened. "Galestar!" squeaked Pebblekit. He darted over, snuggling up tightly to his mother's damp fur.

Galestar sighed deeply. Relief flooded her body. But it lasted no more than a moment.

"StormClan!" she yowled. "Answer me, any cat!"

She swung her head left, then right, screwing up her eyes

in an effort to pierce the gray haze. She couldn't glimpse her Clanmates. And now she realized, with a sickening lurch, that she didn't even know which way to go. *Are they ahead of us? Behind?* She had been so focused on rounding up her kits, she hadn't noticed where they had led her.

"We're not . . . *lost* . . . are we?" Thrushkit whispered fearfully. And Galestar knew that she couldn't hesitate any longer.

"This way," she told the kits, trying to sound confident.

They clambered across the rocks, paws slipping with almost every step. Galestar kept looking all around, but she could see no cat. The rocks looked unfamiliar too. And they seemed more jagged, more treacherous, the farther they went.

The kits were all trembling now, beside themselves with terror. *No point in pretending anymore.* "Help!" Galestar bellowed as loud as she could. "Over here! Help us, please!"

The wind picked up, scouring the hillside and scattering pebbles past their paws. The ground shuddered as though the storm was shaking the very land itself.

"We'll take cover," Galestar told the kits, firmly. "You don't need to be afraid, remember? I'll keep you safe." She hunched low, trying to protect her litter with her own body as the wind came gusting again, so fiercely it threatened to knock them all off their paws. *We can't stay here any longer!*

Glancing around, Galestar's heart leaped to see a crevice between two large boulders. It looked just wide enough for the four of them to fit. "In there! Quickly!" She ushered the

kits down, one by one, then slipped in herself, cowering in between the slabs of gray rock.

The rain kept pounding the hillside overhead, echoing distantly in their makeshift den. But at last, Galestar felt her heart rate begin to slow.

The kits still looked utterly waterlogged, wild-eyed, and frightened as they huddled close to their mother for comfort. "We'll wait till the storm dies down," Galestar purred as soothingly as she could manage. "It can't keep this up forever. And the Clan won't go on without us. I know they won't. When the sky is clear, we'll catch up to them in no time."

Somewhere up above, she thought she heard the distant cry of a cat. *Are they calling to us? Have they even noticed we're missing?* Galestar tried not to think too hard about what the answers might be.

Everything will be fine, she reminded herself. *As soon as the storm lets up, we'll find them.*

We're safe here.

Then she felt it—a rumbling through her paws. A crashing, louder than thunder. The sound of rocks falling, skidding and rolling and tumbling down the hillside, faster and faster, louder and louder . . .

The kits screeched in terror.

And, in a heartbeat, the world turned dark.

Galestar jerked awake with a yowl.

Her heart was racing. She gasped for air. *I'm alive.* A relief

that lasted no more than a moment. Because of course they were still there, stuck in the crevice where they'd hoped to find safety. Trapped in the dark. Encased in rock.

"Galestar?" whimpered Fogkit. "What's wrong?"

The kits must have been asleep too, passed out from sheer exhaustion. Now that Galestar's cry had woken them, they pressed in, seeking what little warmth her body had to offer.

"Nothing," she croaked. "I'm all right." Her throat was raw from yelling out for help.

The rocks were damp and hard and uncomfortable beneath them, and so close on either side that there was hardly room for Galestar to turn around. But now some daylight filtered in, and Galestar could see the gleaming eyes of her kits and the shadowy shapes of their trembling little bodies.

She knew it was still there—but her heart sank all the same as she glanced up and saw the boulder that had fallen onto their shelter in the rockfall, wedged itself in between the two large rocks on either side, and trapped them, leaving only a few cracks for the light to get in. *And no way out.*

The light was bright, as though the sun had come out. And even straining her ears, Galestar couldn't hear the rain anymore—just an occasional drip and the bluster of a breeze, not nearly as fierce as when they'd first taken cover.

The storm's over, she realized. But what good was that if they were stuck here?

"Wait," Galestar told the kits. Then she stretched up, balancing on her hind legs and using her forelegs to heave at the rock.

Straining with every muscle in her body, she could feel it shift, just a little. Hope flickered in her heart.

"Go on!" squealed Thrushkit. "You can do it!"

The other kits joined in, raising a clamor of encouragement.

Galestar heaved for all she was worth. But the hope soon sputtered and died. She could move the rock, but not enough. Not *nearly* enough to roll it free. *If I could get a bit closer to it,* she thought. But it was all she could do to get her forepaws against it, even stretching as high as she could.

At length she slumped down, weary and frustrated, her muscles aching.

"Don't worry," meowed Pebblekit. "You did your best."

But how could she not worry?

She curled up with the kits, purring softly to soothe them. She couldn't even soothe herself, though. The frustration was growing inside her.

We shouldn't be here. We should never have come to the sun-drown-place.

It was Stripestar's fault. *Everything.* And now her frustration was distorting into anger. Rage. If only Stripestar had shared his dream with her, like he ought to have, she would never have agreed to come here. *To the place where the land falls away.*

Would she?

A worm of doubt wriggled in her gut. *Would it have made a difference?* she wondered. For so long, she and Stripestar had shared a vision of StormClan's future, a vision that nothing had shaken. Wouldn't she have found a way to convince

herself that the dream didn't matter? *It had been her fault, too. She hadn't heeded Stoneteller's warning—it had seemed so long ago, so unimportant in comparison to the need to find a safe place for her kits to be born.*

But even so, Stripestar should have shared his dream with her. They were both leaders of StormClan. They'd given up everything for each other. They should have discussed it.

Her angry thoughts came boiling up, and a growl escaped her, low and loud with all her hurt, her frustration, and her fury.

The kits flinched and Galestar cursed inwardly. *I have to stay calm,* she reminded herself. *For them.* And she was trying to think of something comforting to say when another growl sounded. An answering growl, from somewhere up above.

Galestar froze, her body tight with anxiety.

"What was that?" whispered Fogkit.

The growl came again—longer this time. It sounded almost like a question. But it didn't sound like it came from a cat. It didn't sound like anything Galestar had heard before.

Her blood ran cold. *Some hunter, looking for prey,* she thought. She curled her tail tightly around her litter and fixed them with a stern gaze, telling them with her eyes: *Be still. Be silent.* They ought to be safe here, at least, since the rock was so difficult to shift. *Give it a little time,* she told herself, *and the predator will move on.*

A scrabbling of paws on rocks. A scrape of stone. Then, to Galestar's astonishment, she saw the boulder above their heads shift, and more light sliced down into the crevice for an instant, before the boulder rolled back again. The growl sounded again, strained with exertion.

Is it trying to eat us . . . or help us escape? Galestar had no way of knowing. But either way, this might be their only chance to get free.

Heart racing, she stretched up again and set her paws against the rock. She could feel the other beast pushing, shoving at it from the side. She joined in, lending what little strength she had left.

Her forelegs ached. Her muscles were already almost worn out. But slowly, steadily, she could feel the rock moving again. Light streamed into the crevice, more and more of it.

The kits let out gasps of astonishment and delight.

Galestar pushed harder. *Come on . . . Come on . . .*

Then, with a rumbling, shuddering sound, the boulder began to move under its own momentum. Daylight flooded the crevice, so bright it made Galestar blink and flinch back. Her paws left the rock. But it was already done: the boulder went bouncing away, cracking and thundering down the hillside, until a distant *splash* sounded as it sank into the endless lake.

Her eyes had barely adjusted to the sunshine when a shadow fell across them.

Peering upward, she saw that a head had appeared, framed by the two great boulders on either side. A shaggy, furry head with pointed ears like a cat's. It was staring down at them, a dark silhouette against a clear blue sky.

Galestar tensed, ready to fight, her pelt prickling with uncertainty. *What is it? What does it want with us?*

"Is . . . is it a cat?" muttered Fogkit fearfully.

"I don't know," Galestar replied. It did *look* like a cat. A tom, she realized. He had a tabby pelt and whiskers. But he was large—bigger than any warrior she had ever seen. And his fur was longer, somehow rougher and yet fluffier at the same time. He even *smelled* different. An unfamiliar scent that reminded her of strawberries and of warm grass in greenleaf. She cocked her head in confusion.

The big tom made a strange coughing sound. Galestar tensed, ready to fight, until she realized it was only a snort of amusement.

"I suppose you've never seen a wildcat before?" the stranger asked.

Galestar's jaw dropped. *He speaks our language!* Although the wildcat's voice sounded strange—deep and gruff, as though he had a mouth full of pebbles. A voice like gentle thunder.

She felt herself starting to relax. "It's all right," she murmured to the kits, almost convincing herself. "I'm sure this . . . *wildcat* . . . means us no harm."

"Not at all. I give you my word." The wildcat leaned in closer. "Do you need help to get out?"

"I'll go first." Reaching up with her forepaws, Galestar scrambled up and out onto the hillside. And when the wildcat made no move to attack, she stepped back, allowing him to reach down into the crevice and help the kits up, one at a time.

"I am Bound Hunt," purred the tom after setting Fogkit gently down beside her mother. "This is Hunt Fly and Whisper Groom."

With a flicker of anxiety, Galestar turned to see two more

huge cats loping toward them, moving easily across the boulders with long, powerful strides. She licked her lips. If it came to a fight, she might have been able to defeat a single wildcat. But with these two as well—both large tabbies, like Bound Hunt—she and the kits would stand no chance.

Still, they didn't seem hostile. *More . . . curious.* Hunt Fly and Whisper Groom stopped a little way off, watching intently.

"I'm Galestar," she told them. "These are my kits: Thrushkit, Pebblekit, and Fogkit."

Bound Hunt and his companions lowered their heads and straightened their legs in a strange bowing motion that brought a little *mrrow* of laughter from Pebblekit.

"Forgive him," Galestar meowed. "He's never met a wildcat before. Actually . . . neither have I."

"There is nothing to forgive," Bound Hunt replied solemnly. "And we are happy to help. It's fortunate we heard your growl from under the ground. Otherwise we might have prowled straight past you."

"These are your hunting grounds?" Galestar's heart quickened. "So you must have seen other cats like me! A whole Clan. They came this way during the storm."

Bound Hunt shook his head. "I am sorry. We have not seen your friends. When the storm winds blow, we wildcats do not venture from our camp."

"I can't blame you for that," muttered Galestar. "It was foolish to go in such weather. We know that now."

Bound Hunt wrinkled his nose as though thinking deeply. His eyes were green and brown, both at once. The colors

reminded Galestar of the forest home she had left so long ago, and brought a lump to her throat. He was watching her with such attention. Such *kindness*. It was almost unsettling. "You look sad," he purred at last.

"I am," Galestar muttered, taken aback. "Of course. We've lost our Clan. Although, now that I think about it . . . I suppose I've been sad for a while." Her own words startled her. But she knew as she spoke that there was truth in them.

"Then come with us," Bound Hunt offered. "We have fresh-kill. You must be hungry."

Hunt Fly and Whisper Groom stepped aside and Bound Hunt nodded to a little path some way off that led up among the rocks, over the crest of the hill.

"I'm not sure," Galestar meowed cautiously, as the kits shrank closer to her.

Bound Hunt shrugged. "Or stay in your hole, if you wish."

"No—it's not that. We're grateful. It's just that my mate will be looking for us. They were heading away from the lake. I don't know where they've gone, but we need to catch up with them."

"I understand." Bound Hunt nodded. "But still, you must eat. Your kits, too. You cannot bear them all. Let us help you, Galestar. Come to our camp. Eat. Rest. Then, as soon as you have your strength back, set out in search of your mate and your Clan."

Galestar fell silent, considering. She peered all around the hillside, but of course it was empty. StormClan was nowhere to be seen. Besides, the thought of fresh-kill was making her belly rumble.

"Can we go with them, Galestar?" begged Fogkit. "Please? I'm so hungry."

"Is it far?" asked Pebblekit. "My paws hurt."

"Not far," Bound Hunt told him. "I'll even carry you if you like. I've borne heavier than you before, young kit."

He lay down flat, resting his head on his forepaws.

Before Galestar could stop him, Pebblekit darted over and scrambled up onto the wildcat's back. "Ooh! He's so soft!" he squealed.

"Can I go too?" Fogkit begged. Only Thrushkit still clung to Galestar.

Bound Hunt looked deep into Galestar's eyes, and she saw no trickery in them. "You can trust us, Galestar," he told her. He spoke so calmly, so slowly, as though he had all the time in the world. It made Galestar feel calm too.

"Very well." She gave Fogkit a nod, and the kit eagerly clambered up to join her brother on Bound Hunt 's back.

"Are you holding on tight?" Bound Hunt purred. "By the spirits, I can hardly feel a thing!" He rose slowly, steadily, as though the kits were delicate bird's eggs that he feared to drop.

We're safe with him. Galestar knew it, somehow, deep in her heart. She lay down, letting Thrushkit haul himself onto her own back. "Lead on," she told Bound Hunt. "And thank you."

"It's nothing." Bound Hunt turned. "Come. You will all be welcome in the home of the wildcats."

Under a clear blue sky, Galestar followed close behind Bound Hunt, watching her kits as they bumped and bounced

on his broad, strong shoulders, chattering excitedly to each other about what they imagined the wildcats' camp would be like. Hunt Fly and Whisper Groom accompanied them silently, one on each side.

With every moment, Galestar felt more at ease in the company of these strange, large cats. Their movements reminded her pleasantly of the Tribe cats—the way they hopped with such ease among the boulders on the hillside, all still wet from the storm, but warming and steaming gently in the bright morning sunshine.

Galestar didn't even spare a glance back at the endless lake as they reached the top of the hill. *I've had my fill of it,* she thought.

They set off inland, following a winding creek. Upstream, it flowed through fields until at last they reached a patch of woodland where a tall tree spread its branches over a grassy clearing.

Galestar caught the scent of the wildcats long before she saw them. But as she stepped into the camp, she noticed pelts shifting, sliding slowly through the shade cast by the branches overhead.

The wildcats emerged like ghosts from the long grass, their tabby fur blending perfectly with the play of light and shadow in the clearing. They came padding softly towards the newcomers, green-brown eyes glinting with suspicion.

A cold shiver crept through Galestar. She'd been foolish, she realized. She had allowed her empty belly—and Bound Hunt's deep, soothing voice—to lure her into a trap. She

stiffened. Arched her back. She felt Thrushkit's paws dig in deep, her fear spreading like a sickness to her kit.

"They're so big . . . ," Thrushkit whispered fearfully.

Galestar glanced around the wildcats, trying to spot a leader. There didn't seem to be one. But a group of elder wildcats with whitening muzzles held a brief, muttered conversation, then one spoke up for them all. "Who are these strangecats, Bound Hunt? And why have you brought them to our home?"

"We found them trapped beneath a great stone," Bound Hunt explained. "They are hungry and lost, so I offered them our hospitality."

To Galestar's surprise, the wildcats all seemed to relax at once.

"Welcome, then," purred a she-cat.

"Make yourselves comfortable," meowed another.

"I . . . thank you," murmured Galestar, feeling oddly embarrassed at their kindness.

Bound Hunt lowered himself carefully so that Pebblekit and Fogkit could hop off his back. Galestar had hardly set Thrushkit down herself before Whisper Groom came trotting over to them carrying fresh-kill—a large prey creature, limp in his jaws.

"Is that . . . hare?" squealed Pebblekit. "It looks so funny!"

"It's got long ears, just like you told us!" marveled Thrushkit.

"Oh, Galestar, can we eat it?" begged Fogkit.

"They've never seen one before," explained Galestar. She caught Bound Hunt's eye and the wildcat gave her the slightest nod.

Whisper Groom dropped the hare at their paws. It was still warm, and the smell was enough to set Galestar's mouth watering. "Help yourselves," Galestar told the kits. And as they fell eagerly on the fresh-kill, she bowed her head to the wildcats in gratitude.

"You'd better dig in too," murmured Bound Hunt, his deep voice light with amusement. "Or there'll be none left!"

The Clan cats feasted until their bellies were full and aching with satisfaction.

Settling back at last, Galestar felt a contented weariness steal across her. It was only now that she realized how constant her hunger had been by the endless lake, how much it had clouded her mind and made everything seem so much worse than it really was. She lay, stretching out peacefully in the sun and swaying shadows of the branches.

A few of the wildcat she-cats had been watching closely as they ate. Now that they had finished, they came strolling over. One grabbed Fogkit by the scruff of her neck and pulled her in close.

"Whoa!" yelped Fogkit. "What's happening?"

Galestar's stomach lurched, and she was about to leap forward, baring her claws, when the she-cat roughly licked Fogkit's head, making her squirm and snort with surprise—and delight.

"That one needs special care," the she-cat muttered, nodding at Thrushkit. One of her companions approached Thrushkit, nuzzled him gently, then took his injured paw and laid it flat on the ground. Delicately, she began to lick it.

"Eek! That tickles!" squealed Thrushkit. But he was wriggling happily all the same.

A third she-cat took Pebblekit into her charge, and a fourth—an elder—came to Galestar. "My name is Dream Flow," she told Galestar. "I am the mother of Bound Hunt. I will groom you now."

"That's not necessary . . . ," Galestar began to say. But Dream Flow was already rubbing her flank against Galestar's and massaging her head with a firm, rough tongue.

Galestar twisted her head, trying to escape the tongue. But there was something strangely soothing about it. She hesitated, then leaned into the grooming. *It's just like sharing tongues back in the forest,* she thought. And for once, the thought of her old home didn't send a jarring pang of loss through her. It felt good to have found something almost familiar, far away from the forest they had left so long ago.

Galestar sank down into the soft grass, allowing the older she-cat to keep on grooming her. How long had it been since some cat had taken care of her like this? For as long as she could remember, she had spent her life looking after others. First WindClan, then StormClan. Now the kits. Not that she begrudged them that. *But still.*

She let out a long, slow yawn. She had barely slept the night before for worry. Now her eyelids felt heavy. She rested her head on her forelegs. Blinking, she saw that her kits were already snoozing peacefully. The she-cats picked them up one by one, carrying them gently to a den at the edge of the clearing made of fallen branches and leaves, where they laid them on a grass-lined nest to slumber.

Galestar sighed happily.

"You're safe here," murmured Dream Flow. "Let your worries go. You will wake up all the stronger for it."

The words felt true. They felt like magic. And they echoed in Galestar's mind as she closed her eyes at last and allowed herself to drift away, like a leaf on a stream.

She was back on the moor, as though she had never left. *WindClan territory.* How she'd missed it! The breeze sighing through the heather, rustling the gorse bushes that surrounded their camp.

Galestar knew she was dreaming, but she didn't care. It was a good dream. She'd been so happy back then as the leader of WindClan.

Hadn't she?

Pebblenose walked beside her, and his calm presence gave her the comfort and strength to do what she feared to do. "It's all right, Galestar," he purred when they reached the den of the medicine cat. "Whatever happens, we will face it together. Nothing will come between us."

"Nothing," Galestar agreed.

With a deep breath, she ducked her head under the low-hanging gorse and crept inside.

Goldenleaf sat waiting for her there, only her snow-white throat and belly visible in the gloom. And her eyes, glittering gold and watching Galestar with disdain. "Well? Why have you come?"

She felt so small, like a kit again, as she stammered

it out. "I think . . . I feel like . . . I might be heavy with a litter."

Goldenleaf's eyes twinkled with amusement. All of WindClan was here now, somehow fitting inside the den. They stared at her, every one of them silent, angry, mocking. They made her want to curl up with embarrassment and never show her face again.

"You?" sneered Goldenleaf. "You think *you* deserve to have kits?"

The Clan murmured with astonishment, every cat disgusted at Galestar's entitlement.

"Thank StarClan you aren't expecting," Goldenleaf told her. "Our ancestors would never allow it! You couldn't take care of kits, Galestar. You can't even take care of WindClan!"

Galestar felt her heart breaking as she quailed under the cruel gaze of her Clanmates.

They were somehow above the camp now, looking down on it as the sky clouded over and rain began to fall. Goldenleaf gestured with a forepaw, taking in the camp and the moor beyond, the great rolling expanse of grass and heather that Galestar knew and loved so well. "You'll give all of this away, you know," Goldenleaf told her. "And for what?"

The sky darkened. Lightning flashed and—

A crack of thunder.

Galestar jerked, suddenly wide awake.

The moon had risen and a cold wind was blowing through

the wildcat camp. Some cat must have moved her under the shelter, into the grassy nest she had seen earlier beneath the exposed roots of a fallen tree. Her kits were with her, slumbering peacefully close by.

How long have I been sleeping?

A pattering sounded overhead, drumming against the branches of the trees. A drop of water soaked into Galestar's fur—then another. *Rain. It's raining again.*

She lurched suddenly to her paws, her mind thrown into turmoil, like a disturbed ants' nest.

"Galestar. Are you all right?"

Spinning, she saw Hunt Fly awake, standing guard at the edge of the camp.

"The storm! When did it start?" Galestar gabbled. "When did the rain begin?"

Hunt Fly cocked his head in puzzlement. "It's only a little water," he replied. "No need to be afraid. It began in the evening, before sundown. You and your kits have been sleeping like the dead!"

"And now it's . . . ?"

"After moonhigh."

No!

Galestar sank back, despair rising as though to drown her, like water flooding an empty cave. She could see that the ground was already waterlogged, the grass wet all around. By morning, any lingering scent trail left by StormClan would be gone. Destroyed by the storm.

Just like it destroyed everything else.

Fool! Mouse-brain! Would she never learn? She should have rejected the wildcats' help. She should have set out with the kits right away and sought out StormClan while they were still close by. But now it was too late. Her Clan was surely gone. *Stripestar* was gone.

All because of her and her wretched decisions.

What would become of her now?

What would become of her kits?

Chapter 26

In the shadow of the bushes, Stripestar's Clanmates were muttering again, in voices too low for him to hear. Not that he cared. He hadn't spoken much to any cat in the long moon since they had left the sun-drown-place behind. He preferred it that way.

After all, there didn't seem much worth saying anymore.

The leaves rustled as Hazelfrond and Nettlesting pushed their way through to where the rest of StormClan hid, crouched low with their bellies pressed against the cold, dark earth.

"Well?" Stripestar asked the scouts. "Did you see it?"

Hazelfrond shook her head. "The monster's not there."

"No Twolegs, then. They must have gone away until newleaf comes again." Stripestar let out a long, slow sigh. "We'll stay here a while. Get some rest before we push on."

Edging forward, Stripestar looked out across the patch of neat, cropped grass toward the rear of the Twolegplace where they'd spent last leaf-bare. There was the little bit of ice set into the Twoleg door that they'd used to come and go by. In fact, the whole den was just as he remembered it, unmarked

by the rain and storms of this terrible leaf-fall. It was almost as though StormClan had never left. *And how I wish we hadn't.*

"Split the Clan into hunting patrols," Stripestar murmured to Tinyclaw. "We'll get a fresh-kill pile going."

"Are you coming too?" asked Tinyclaw.

There was an edge to the way she asked it. *Like she's afraid of the answer.* Lately, it seemed like Stripestar's deputy was always treading carefully around him. As though his grief were a sleeping dog that she was scared might wake and snap at her.

"I'll go on ahead," Stripestar told her, trying not to lose his temper. "I'll search the den, make sure it's safe."

Tinyclaw hesitated. "Alone?"

"Yes, alone. Is that a problem?"

"No!" Tinyclaw hurriedly assured him. "Of course not. Should I—"

But Stripestar didn't stay to hear the rest of her question. He slunk across the dew-damp grass under a granite sky.

It was good to be on his own for once. No other cats to worry about. Or to disappoint. Or to abandon.

He slipped into the house, enjoying the familiar *whsshh-snap* of the entrance. But as he stopped to look around the space inside, his heart began to ache.

Galestar was everywhere. There was the colorful Twoleg pelt laid out on the wooden ground, thick and soft, where she used to take naps after sunhigh. He could just picture the way she had stretched out, sometimes rolling and swiping her paws at invisible prey as she slumbered. There was the wooden leg

of the Twoleg nest that was still marked by Galestar's claws. *Her favorite spot for sharpening them,* Stripestar remembered.

It hurt to see them—these places touched by her presence. Yet he wanted to all the same. They connected him to her. And he wanted that, more than anything. He wanted to remember everything. *Almost everything.*

With a heavy heart, he scrambled up the ledged hill onto the upper level of the Twoleg den, then onto the big, cozy Twoleg nest where they had spent so much of leaf-bare, lying on the soft, smooth white expanse and watching the meager sunshine move slowly across the sky-blue walls inside the den. As he lay there again, his breath stirred a single black hair left behind on the bed. Was it one of hers? No—more likely it belonged to a Twoleg.

With a sigh, he rolled onto his back and stared upward at the white surface above the nest. Beyond it was the sloping top of the Twoleg den where he had shared so many more precious moments with his mate. Just the two of them, huddling close for warmth, perched on gray stone that was almost always frosted with leaf-bare cold or damp with rain.

Before he could help it, the image of wet gray stone dragged him mercilessly back to those few memories he didn't want to hold onto.

The storm. The moment he had realized—*they're not here.* Then the desperate search amid the stinging hail, the time he had thought he heard their cries above the howling wind . . . followed by the slow leaching of hope and the fateful decision to push on, to get the Clan to safety.

He remembered returning the following day with Tumbletail and Frecklepelt. Searching the rocks again and again and finding nothing. The cruel beauty of that sunny morning, and the way the light shimmered on the waters of the endless lake. The way he had shouted their names until he was hoarse.

After they'd had no luck, the three of them had returned to the makeshift camp to enlist every single cat in the Clan. Stripestar had forced them all back to the rocky hill, made them scour the place for any sign of his lost family, until the sun went down and they had no choice but to traipse back once again, with no Galestar and no kits.

All evening, Stripestar had lain alone and silent, a different cat from the one who had set out that morning. Until at last Tinyclaw had come cringing, offering cautiously to relieve Stripestar and lead StormClan onward until Stripestar was ready to take charge again.

That was when he had understood. His Clanmates believed that Galestar and the kits were lost forever. They didn't want to wait. They wanted safety. They wanted a home.

And Stripestar *owed* them that, after everything they had gone through for him and for Galestar. StormClan had suffered and suffered again, all because of his folly.

Now it was time to do what he should have done so long ago. Time for him to save StormClan, not from a rival Clan, or from foxes, or from starvation.

I have to save them from myself.

It had taken him so long to understand that. But he knew it now, at last. Even if it *was* too late.

So he'd turned down Tinyclaw, and he'd led StormClan away at dawn. They had followed the sun, just as they had when they came to the sun-drown-place. But this time, they pursued it in the morning and fled it in the afternoon.

Heading for the forest.

He'd left them. Galestar. His whole family. But he hadn't given up on them. He would never give up on them. They were alive. They had to be. And one day, somehow, Stripestar knew that he would see them again.

The clicking of claws on the ledged hill snapped Stripestar out of his thoughts. Twisting on the Twoleg nest, he saw Tinyclaw come padding up to the top. "Stripestar?" The big, ungainly she-cat looked somehow even more shifty than usual. Even less willing to meet his eye.

"What is it?" he sighed. "Surely the patrols haven't come back already."

Tinyclaw shook her head. "Actually . . . our Clanmates have been talking."

Stripestar's pelt prickled with unease. "About what?"

"I think . . . maybe it's best if you hear it for yourself. They're outside. Waiting."

What choice do I have?

As he leaped down from the nest and followed Tinyclaw down the stairs, Stripestar could feel his heart sinking. He should have known something like this was coming. Perhaps he had. Perhaps he'd simply refused to think about it.

But now he was going to have to.

The whole Clan was waiting, just as Tinyclaw had told him,

spread out in a semicircle as Stripestar and Tinyclaw stepped out at the rear of the Twoleg den.

No cat would meet Stripestar's eyes, but he took his time staring at them each in turn, sweeping his gaze around, daring them to look up at him.

He saw now what he should have seen days ago—*moons* ago. How very thin they all were. How bedraggled. How tired and sad and desperate. This wasn't StormClan. This was the shadow of StormClan.

At length, it was Goldenleaf who stepped forward. "Stripestar," she murmured. "Since we left the sun-drown-place, I have slept poorly. My dreams have been . . . troubled. I've seen fragments, images that I could not quite interpret . . . until last night. Last night, I had a clear dream. My first in many moons."

Stripestar dipped his head, giving the medicine cat permission to continue. He didn't trust himself to speak.

"I stood beside a dried-up river running through a forest," Goldenleaf continued. "The water was dirty, no more than a trickle, and the muddy banks were parched and cracked. I felt sad to look upon it. But as I strolled its course, I saw the river split in two. The farther I walked, the clearer the water ran. The trickle became a flood, until at last both streams ran high with sparkling pure water, the cleanest and freshest I had ever seen."

"And what do you make of this dream?" Stripestar forced himself to ask. He already knew what the answer would be. *But I have to hear her say it.*

Finally, Goldenleaf looked at him. There was no anger in her calm golden eyes. *Only pity.* "The river represents StormClan," Goldenleaf replied. "You know this, Stripestar. Together, our Clans—WindClan and ThunderClan—have stumbled and faltered. Our stream has almost dried up. If we are to thrive again, there is only one thing to be done. We must return to the way things were. The way they have always been. We must be WindClan and ThunderClan once again. If we follow this path, both Clans will prosper. We will both be stronger and healthier than we have ever been together. This is the path. This is the *only* path."

Stripestar looked around at his Clanmates, taking in the faint hope in their eyes. They were all gazing at him now in silent supplication.

"I see you told our Clanmates of this dream before you mentioned it to your leader," Stripestar ground out. It was all he could do not to snarl. "Well, listen! Sometimes a dream is only a dream. Do you really believe that after all this time, StarClan has finally taken an interest in our future?"

"Not in *our* future," Goldenleaf calmly replied. "But in the future of ThunderClan and WindClan—yes."

"But think of all we have sacrificed in the name of StormClan! And you would throw it all away?"

"We *have* sacrificed," Whitestep shot back. "We have sacrificed too much. Every cat here has given and given again. For *your* dream, Stripestar. Yours and Galestar's. We have followed you. We have been faithful to you."

"We gave up our homes," added Icefoot.

"Our Clans," put in Roughpelt. "Cats we loved and had to bid farewell to."

"And StarClan," muttered Stoneflower. "We turned our backs on them."

"And where has it gotten us?" finished Whitestep. "Look at what's left of StormClan! Was it worth it, Stripestar?"

The question burned in Stripestar's mind. It was the very same question he had asked himself every sleepless night since they had left the sun-drown-place. A question he had turned every which way and found no answer to. Before, when it had been him and Galestar and their kits . . . back *then* it had been worth it. *But now . . . ?*

He made no reply—only hung his head.

"You promised to lead us back to the forest," purred Goldenleaf more gently now. "For that we are grateful. But we will not go to StormClan's old camp. We WindClan cats will fight to make our home on the moor, as our ancestors did, for generations. I do not know which cat will lead us, nor if StarClan will grant another leader nine lives. I do not even know if RiverClan and ShadowClan will allow us to return! Only one thing is certain—we can be StormClan no longer. We are WindClan. And so we will remain. *Always.*"

A soft murmur of agreement rose from some of the assembled warriors. *The WindClan warriors.*

"I thought . . . I thought we were building something. As StormClan." Stripestar's voice sounded pitiful and pleading even to his own ears.

"There *is* no StormClan!" growled Peaktail. "Not anymore."

Stripestar was startled at the tom's ferocity. *He's not speaking to me like I'm his leader,* he realized. *He's speaking to me like I'm from another Clan. ThunderClan.* "StormClan is dead," Peaktail went on. "It died with Galestar, out on those rocks, beside the endless lake."

Stripestar's neck fur bristled. He squared his shoulders, his claws tingling to be unsheathed. Tinyclaw must have noticed it, because the deputy laid her tail gently against Stripestar's flank.

Slowly, with difficulty, Stripestar forced himself to relax.

"StormClan made a kind of sense before," Flash tried to explain. "When we had two leaders. One from WindClan and one from ThunderClan. But now . . . now we WindClan cats are just following the leader of another Clan."

"Without Galestar, there's nothing holding us together," added Spotnose.

Stripestar fought not to show the resentment that was seething in his belly. Because hadn't it always been like this? They had never listened to him. *Not like they listened to Galestar.* No wonder they were turning on him now that she was gone.

Had he ever truly been a leader of StormClan? Had StormClan ever even *existed*? None of these cats seemed to have believed in it. They had no loyalty to their Clan. *They were just going along with us, the whole time.*

A long, awful silence stretched out between him and the Clan that had once been his. He didn't know what to say. He could feel a deep sadness welling up inside. He had already lost his family. His nine lives. Now he was losing StormClan too.

"This Clan . . .," he croaked at last. "It's all I have left."

"This Clan is bigger than you, Stripestar," muttered Tumbletail.

He couldn't deny it. He looked around at the warriors he'd once thought had looked up to him. Who had followed him to the ends of the earth. *To the place where the land falls away.* He saw sympathy here and there. But no cat spoke up for him. Not even those from ThunderClan.

They've decided. All of them. And he understood at last that there was no changing their minds.

Stripestar took a long, deep breath. Then he drew himself up, puffing out his chest. Because perhaps he hadn't lost everything. Perhaps he could still muster just a little pride. *That's one thing they can't take from me.*

"Very well," he meowed, keeping his voice as calm and level as he could manage. "I will return with you to the forest. I will guide you safely back. Then, if StarClan wills it, I will allow you WindClan cats to leave—to rebuild your old Clan—while I do the same for ThunderClan." He hesitated. "I only ask one thing. Don't split us up now. Not until we reach the forest. Whatever you think of me . . . whatever you think of StormClan . . . the journey may yet be hard. We will be stronger together. Do you agree?"

The warriors exchanged glances, some muttering in low voices to each other.

"We agree," replied Goldenleaf at last, though she didn't sound happy about it.

So she speaks for WindClan now, thought Stripestar gloomily. *It's already begun. The Clan is coming apart.*

He wondered which cat would become the new leader of WindClan, and the thought brought a lump to his throat. Because no cat could. No cat could even come close.

No cat could ever replace Galestar.

"You did the right thing."

Stripestar didn't look up. He lay on the top of the Twoleg-place staring aimlessly out into nothingness. Dusk was falling, shadows lengthening across the land. In the den below, he could hear the muffled sounds of the cats—the ones who had once been StormClan—bustling around, making nests and squabbling over fresh-kill.

Tinyclaw came scrambling across the slope to settle at his side. *Just like Galestar did once.* They remained like that, in silence, for a long time.

"I know it wasn't easy," Tinyclaw purred softly. "Actually . . . I suppose . . . it must have been very difficult."

Stripestar snorted. "You suppose right."

"I'm sorry," Tinyclaw murmured.

Something had eased between them. Now that the cats had shared their true feelings, it felt as though Tinyclaw was able to relax again. It felt like old times. *Almost.*

But that thought stung Stripestar again. Because he remembered how his closeness with Tinyclaw had come between him and Galestar in the marshland. How she thought he was favoring ThunderClan cats over WindClan warriors. Looking back, he couldn't imagine why he'd allowed *anything* to come between them. *Did I have bees in my brain?* But on the

other paw, it made perfect sense. He was a ThunderClan cat, after all. So was Tinyclaw.

Once more he found himself wondering . . . had they ever been anything other than ThunderClan cats and WindClan cats, just rubbing shoulders for a time? Had StormClan ever meant anything at all?

They had held such high hopes, he and Galestar. But StarClan had been right all along.

StormClan is nothing.

And if you proceed, you will walk in darkness all your moons.

That was the promise they had made. Now, at last, Stripestar knew that it was coming true.

"It was a mistake," breathed Tinyclaw as though she had guessed what he was thinking. "That's all. Just a mistake. Now it's up to us to set things right."

And find a way to live, thought Stripestar. *In spite of all we've done.*

Chapter 27

A faint moon hung ghostly in the pale-blue sky above the endless lake. A reminder that dusk would soon be falling. *Time to be getting back to camp,* thought Galestar. *Back to the kits.* She let out a long, slow sigh. She felt so tired. So disappointed.

All day long she had picked her way across this little stretch of shore, hopping from boulder to boulder, squeezing into caves, diving into crevices, even venturing back as far as StormClan's old camp beside the sand where all their nests had long ago been washed away. The same bit of shore where she and her kits had been trapped on the night of the storm. The shore she had searched every day for a whole moon.

Of course, there was nothing to be found. The endless fishy stench of the lake itself made most scents difficult to pick up. She'd identified a few unfamiliar animals, some rodents and gulls. But not a trace of the cats of StormClan.

By all the stars . . . She was starting to forget what her old Clanmates really *did* smell like.

"If you want to stay longer, I can bring you fresh kill," murmured Bound Hunt. "It's no trouble."

The wildcat had followed her all day like a shadow, searching

with her every bit as carefully. Now he perched on a boulder close to hers, his rough fur tousled by a cold wind that was getting ever colder as evening drew in. Not that Bound Hunt so much as shivered. Galestar didn't think she'd heard him complain about anything in all the time she'd known him.

"You've done enough," Galestar told him. "More than enough."

"I don't like to see you unhappy." Bound Hunt looked away. "Your kits will be missing you. Let's return to the camp. We will try again tomorrow."

"No."

The wildcat looked at her in surprise. "No?"

Galestar met his gaze—so sincere, so guileless. "Your sense of smell is better than mine, Bound Hunt. So tell me the truth. Have you caught even the slightest scent of a cat like me in all these days we've been searching?"

Bound Hunt pawed the rock, looking uncomfortable. "I'm afraid not," he admitted.

"Because there is no scent trail. Because StormClan is gone. It's time to give up the search—our Clanmates have left us behind. I don't know why, and I don't know where they've gone. But they have. And it's time for me to face the truth. They might be gone for good. And my kits might . . ." She faltered, but forced herself to speak her greatest fear out loud. "My kits might never see their father again."

Silently, Bound Hunt crossed to the boulder where she stood and sat at her side, brushing up against her flank. He laid his tail over hers, and she didn't flick it away. Just enjoyed

the warm, comforting weight of it. "I am so sorry, Galestar," he whispered at last.

Galestar rested her head against his, breathing in the familiar scent of strawberries and warm grass.

For a while they stayed like that, staring out across the restless waters of the unending lake. It was a sight that Galestar had come to love, much to her surprise. The wildcats' ability to hunt large prey, along with their familiarity with the terrain, meant that no cat ever went hungry. Now that she had plenty of fresh-kill and a safe place to sleep, she had found that there was something calming about that great expanse and the endless foam and swash of its waters against the shore.

"I don't know who I am anymore," Galestar confessed at last. She let out a snort of bitter amusement. "Does that sound strange? I have been the leader of two Clans. I've hardly known anything else. What am I without them?"

"A hunter," Bound Hunt replied without hesitation. "A fine one. A good mother, too, to three very troublesome kits."

Galestar jabbed him playfully in the ribs. She knew from the sparkle in his eyes that he was joking.

"And a formidable enemy to those who cross you," Bound Hunt finished, wincing and nosing his flank where Galestar had shoved him. "You will find your path, Galestar. I know you. You are a brave, determined cat. Nothing can hold you back for long." He hesitated, looking oddly awkward. "I wanted you to find your Clan because that was what you wanted. But to tell you the truth, there is a part of me that is

grateful for every day you stay with the wildcats. You *and* your kits. I am . . . fond of you."

Galestar bit back a *mrrow* of laughter. Bound Hunt looked so earnest. *So serious!*

But his words troubled her, too. Because she could tell that the tom was being honest with her, just as he always was. And she didn't know how to reply.

Honest. It made her think of Stripestar and his secrets. He had kept so much from her. And still he was a mystery. Why *had* he left them here? Why had he abandoned his family? Perhaps, somehow, he had had no choice. She wanted to believe that. She had always wanted to think the best of him.

But he always made it so hard.

Bound Hunt was still waiting so patiently. *I owe him an answer.* At last, she lifted her head to look the wildcat straight in his green-brown eyes. "You've been so kind to me," she told him. "And to my kits. I've felt so at ease with you and with the wildcats. More than I have in moons. In *seasons.* I respect your traditions, and I appreciate how willing you are to include me, and my kits, in everything you do. But . . . I can't promise that we'll stay here forever. Because the truth is, I still can't imagine a future without the father of my kits." She looked down at her paws. "My heart is still with Stripestar, Bound Hunt."

"I know that," the wildcat purred. "I did not mean to upset you, Galestar. I only wanted you to know that I am here for you. I will always be here for you, and you will always be part of our group, even if you only live with us for a short time." He

paused, then added, "And if you ever change your mind, I will be waiting."

A full moon shed white light upon a clearing deep in the woods where the wildcats had gathered. Galestar sat among them, her kits close at her paws. Together they gazed up in awe at the dead rowan tree.

Stars above . . . it was like no tree Galestar had ever seen before. It stood alone right in the center of the clearing, as though even the other trees were fearful of it. Its twisting branches were bare and gleamed silver in the moonlight. Its trunk was hollowed out and darkened inside, as though by fire.

It was like the skeleton of a tree, reaching bony limbs up toward the starry sky. And yet there was something so . . . *alive* about it. It made Galestar's fur tingle, just as it had when she had visited the Moonstone so long ago.

The wildcats had spread out in a circle around the tree, their heads bowed in respect. Galestar's kits huddled closer to her, and she knew that they could feel it too.

This place is special.

"Tonight we speak with our ancestors." Dream Flow nodded to Galestar, and Galestar stepped forward as she'd been told to do. Her kits came with her, their eyes wide and shining with wonder in the light of the moon. "We speak with them of Galestar. Of Pebblekit, and Thrushkit, and Fogkit."

Dream Flow lowered her head, muttering as though to herself. For a few heartbeats, Galestar thought she might

be falling asleep, until the wildcat elder looked up suddenly, her eyes glittering strangely. She seemed to be seeing right through Galestar, to another place entirely.

"I call on you, my ancestors," Dream Flow intoned. "We have welcomed these smallcats to live among us. While they are with us, they will follow our ways. They will be wildcats, too. And every wildcat kit must have a guide. Which of you, my ancestors, will watch over Pebblekit?"

Silence spread across the clearing. Galestar felt suddenly nervous. She could hear her heart pounding in her ears. *What if the ancestors don't accept us?*

Suddenly another wildcat elder jerked his head up. He stood tall, his posture strangely unlike an old tom's. He looked young and full of coiled strength. "I, Roll Flick, will be Thrushkit's guide."

Galestar let out a soft gasp. The voice that had come out of the elder was the voice of another cat entirely. *It's an ancestor speaking through him,* she understood. It was almost impossible to believe—that there was an ancestor here among them within the body of the elder—and yet she knew deep in her bones that it was true.

The elder—and the ancestor—turned to peer at Thrushkit. The little kit squirmed away, burrowing into Galestar's flank.

"Do not be afraid, Thrushkit of the Clans." The voice of Roll Flick softened, and there was a kindly twinkle in the eyes of the elder. "There is great courage within you. I see it. I shall guide your paw steps, Thrushkit. I shall walk always at

your side, and one day you will grow to be a great tom—gentle, wise, and strong."

Galestar felt Thrushkit's tense little body relax. His ears pricked and he sat up straighter, his chest filling with pride at the words of the ancestor.

"From now on, our two names are one," murmured Roll Flick. "You are a kit no longer, Thrushkit. You are Thrush Roll."

A chorus of joyful mews rose from the assembled wildcats.

Galestar's insides twisted up with a strange rush of emotions. *Thrush Roll.* All her life, she had dreamed that her kits would become warriors. Could she really call her kit by a wildcat name?

And yet . . . She could feel Thrushkit shuddering with excitement at his new name and at the kindness with which the wildcats had welcomed him. And she couldn't deny that the thought of an ancestor spirit watching over her little tom made her feel so calm—so relieved. *It's not just me,* she thought. *Some other cat will be taking care of him too.*

"And which of you, my ancestors, will watch over Fogkit?" asked Dream Flow when the wildcats had quieted down.

Galestar listened with a quiet contentment settling like warmth through her body as another ancestor spoke through another elder. Nuzzle Hiss became the guide of Fogkit. Then Lunge Snap offered to be guide of Pebblekit. One by one, Galestar's kits sat up with delight, reveling in the applause of the wildcats and in their new names, taken from the ancestors and combined with their own.

Fog Nuzzle, thought Galestar. *Pebble Lunge.* The names felt oddly right. As though they were the names the kits had been born to carry all along. And the way the ancestors spoke to the kits . . . *with such kindness . . . with such love . . .*

"We thank you, ancestors," meowed Dream Flow when the kits had received their guides and the gathering had fallen quiet once again. "And we bid you farewell. Go free, and may the prey run well always, until—" She broke off suddenly and slumped forward.

Galestar's heart lurched. *Is something wrong?* But none of the wildcats seemed worried.

A heartbeat later, Dream Flow sat up. Galestar could see at once that she wasn't herself—that an ancestor was about to speak through her.

"Greetings to you, Galestar," came a voice from Dream Flow—the voice of a young tom. "I am Rise Stretch. We see you. We see your determination. We see your strength. It is a wonder to behold."

Galestar dipped her head in thanks, feeling suddenly awkward as the eyes of the wildcats turned upon her.

"Rest assured, Galestar," Rise Stretch purred, "you and your family will always be safe among the wildcats. For you have chosen the wildcat way of life. You are a cat full grown, and yet you have no guide. And so I pledge myself to you. I will walk with you all your days. I will be the guardian of your health, of your strength, of your heart. And from now on, our two names are one. You are Galestar no longer. You are Gale Rise."

Once again, Galestar felt the wildcats watching, waiting to hear her response.

"I . . . I don't know what to say," Galestar stammered.

Her kits looked up at her, all huddling close.

"Gale Rise . . . ," repeated Pebble Lunge. "I like it."

"I *love* it," purred Fog Nuzzle.

"It suits you," added Thrush Roll.

To her surprise, Galestar found that her heart was thudding with emotion. She gazed around at the wildcats who had taken them in, who had looked after them, who had accepted them without question when they were most in need.

I've never felt so cared for, Galestar realized with a jolt of shock. *I've never felt so loved.*

Her glance lingered at last on Bound Hunt, who sat among the other cats, watching her with eyes that shone. He nodded his head ever so slightly. A silent communication between the two of them.

It was so strange to think of it. Galestar had led StormClan to so many new places, so many new camps. But none of them had ever felt truly safe or secure. None of them had felt like home.

But this . . . , she thought. *This is what a home feels like.*

"Thank you," she murmured at last, not just to Rise Stretch, but to all the wildcats. "Thank you for everything."

Chapter 28

Stripestar groaned and rolled over, screwing his eyes tightly shut. "What? What is it?"

He'd been deeply asleep, but now some cat was shaking him, pushing at him with a forepaw. "Stripestar?" Tinyclaw's voice. "Stripestar, you have to wake up. It's . . . it's bad news."

What other kind would it be? Wearily and with a sinking heart, Stripestar stretched and forced himself up on his paws.

The air was chilly, the sky a deep blue that signaled dawn wasn't far off. *Too early to be up, though.*

A quarter moon had passed since they'd left the Twoleg den, and they had put together another makeshift camp last night much like all the others. The nests were of reeds and long grass, built in the shade of a willow that grew on the banks of a stream beside a tumbledown Twoleg bridge.

But now half of those nests were empty.

Stripestar felt a strange numbness creep across him as he identified the cats who remained, slowly coming out of their slumber, yawning and stretching.

ThunderClan cats.

Checking a second time, he saw that there wasn't a single WindClan cat left in the camp.

"They went in the night," Tinyclaw explained. "I didn't see them go. And by the time I woke up, needing the dirtplace, it was too late. I tried tracking them, but they were long gone. If we hurry, perhaps we could—"

"No," Stripestar cut her off. "What's the point? They've made their decision."

So that's it. StormClan is finished.

He tried to feel sad. He tried to feel angry. But he couldn't seem to feel anything at all. Since they'd left the Twoleg den, the WindClan and ThunderClan cats had found something to quarrel about every day. *And last night's argument was the very worst.*

It had begun with Icefoot grumbling that they should have stayed longer by the sun-drown-place. That they had given up on Galestar too soon and left her for dead. Before Stripestar had even had a chance to respond, Tinyclaw had rounded on the ex-WindClan she-cat. *So why didn't you speak up then?* she'd hissed. *Stripestar only did what was best for StormClan!*

From there, things had only gotten worse. The bad feeling spread like a forest fire until every cat was hurling accusations at their Clanmates.

Stripestar only thinks of ThunderClan!

You WindClan cats, always complaining about something!

We haven't even reached the forest and already you're acting like you're better than us.

Only Stripestar had kept his silence. What was there to

say? They were tired, and sad, and fed up with each other. That was all there was to it.

Besides, what did it matter if a WindClan warrior blamed Stripestar for the mess they were in, when he blamed himself already? Icefoot was right. They *had* left too soon. They *should* have stayed. And now, because of his terrible decisions, Galestar—*and our kits*—might still be suffering.

They *ought* to be angry with him. All of them. It was no more than he deserved.

At length, Stripestar had slunk away and left them to their furious quarrel. Only Tinyclaw seemed to notice. As he'd left, the deputy had fixed him with a disbelieving stare. *How could you?* she seemed to be asking him. *How could you not defend yourself?* Stripestar didn't know how to explain. And even if he did, he had a feeling that Tinyclaw wouldn't understand.

There was only one cat who had ever really understood him.

So he'd crawled away to the nest he'd barely bothered to scrape together and collapsed, giving himself over to restless nightmares. Until now.

"Stripestar!"

He flinched, jerked back into the present. Tinyclaw was looking to him, expecting an answer. The other cats were all up now too—ThunderClan cats—muttering to each other, some growling with anger, others whimpering with sadness, as they took in the empty camp and began to understand what had happened.

"You have to tell them something," Tinyclaw whispered. "Please? You have to . . . be a leader."

Stripestar nodded. But he felt so weary. *What kind of leader would allow such a thing to happen?* Secretly, he had hoped that he might somehow hold the Clan together after all—that when they reached the forest, the WindClan cats would understand that they were stronger together as StormClan. Now he felt embarrassed at the very thought. *What a fool!*

Of course they wanted nothing to do with him.

And here, finally, there could be no doubt. StormClan was dead.

"Gather around, all of you!" Tinyclaw called. She hustled the warriors, the apprentices, and the elders, forming them into a group around Stripestar so they could hear him speak. There were so few of them. They looked so anxious. So desperate. *So afraid.*

More than ever, these cats needed a good leader. A confident, brave cat who could guide them back to their home. Make the Clan strong once again.

And instead they've got me.

Stripestar held up a paw, and slowly the remnants of ThunderClan fell silent.

"My Clanmates," he began. "I don't know what awaits us in the forest. Many moons have passed since we left. What has become of the other Clans? What will become of *us*? I cannot tell you. All I know is . . . is . . ."

He faltered, his voice breaking. But he forced the words out anyway. "All I know is that I have failed you. I have led you into disaster time and time again. I cannot do so again. I cannot lead ThunderClan into its future. And I cannot lead you now."

A few shocked murmurs spread around the gathered cats.

"Stripestar—" Tinyclaw began, but he pressed on.

"I made a dreadful mistake when Galestar and I created StormClan. I am sorry for it—sorrier than you will ever know. I ignored StarClan when they warned us to turn back. When I think of it now, I can hardly believe my own folly! I loved her so much, I thought nothing else mattered. I thought we could bind two Clans together with nothing more than that love. But now . . ."

Stripestar hung his head, unable to meet any cat's gaze.

"Now she is gone. Our kits are gone. I cannot tell you how that feels. But I know what it means—StormClan was never meant to be. It was doomed right from the beginning.

"I have nothing left to offer you. Instead, I ask for your mercy. Allow me to return with you to the forest. Allow me to beg forgiveness for ThunderClan at the Moonstone. Allow me to plead with StarClan to take you back. And after that . . . I will leave you. I will do no more harm to you, or to any cat. It will be over."

When Stripestar had finished, a silence settled over the gathered cats, so heavy with sadness that it made him think of a vigil.

And what else is this but a vigil?

He waited, burning with shame, racked by grief, preparing himself for the judgment of his Clanmates.

The silence stretched on until Stripestar couldn't help but glance up. To his astonishment, he saw no anger on the faces

of the warriors who had once followed him. Instead, he saw eyes that glittered with sorrow. He saw ears flattened with pity. He saw love. A lump formed in his throat, and he had to swallow back a fresh surge of emotion.

"I can't bear to see you like this, Stripestar," purred Whitestep at last. The wind ruffled her long gray-and-white fur as she watched him, her green eyes brimming with sympathy. "Listen. I lost my mate too—my beloved Rosebush. So perhaps I can understand a little of your pain. You led us, Stripestar, but Rosebush's decisions were his own. So were Galestar's. You cannot blame yourself for all that has passed."

Other warriors murmured their agreement.

"You've made mistakes," Whitestep went on. "Haven't we all? We know you were trying to do what was right. We know you love ThunderClan. And so I would ask you this: Lead us to the forest. See us safely to the Moonstone. After that . . . I hope you will remain with ThunderClan. But let our fate rest in StarClan's paws."

Stripestar looked around, waiting for some other cat to object—but none did. Even Tumbletail gave a silent nod of agreement.

They still accept me, thought Stripestar. He hardly dared to believe it was true. *After everything I've done, I still have a home in ThunderClan.* He felt dizzy with gratitude.

"Very well," he croaked. "I will remain your leader."

At least for now. Until they reached the forest. Until StarClan delivered its judgment.

He had a feeling they would not be as forgiving as his Clanmates.

Stripestar stood on a rocky slope near the summit of High-stones. His paws ached. His limbs trembled with the exertion of the climb. He panted, his pelt damp with a thin drizzle that fell from the gray sky.

There they were, laid out below them in patches of grassland and woods, the river and the long, straight stripe of the Thunderpath, visible even through the dim haze of rain.

The forest territories.

For a while, no cat spoke a word. They all stood, taking in the view with wonder and with apprehension.

They had traveled for half a moon since the WindClan cats had departed, moving as quickly as they could. They had risen with the sun and dropped to the ground at sundown, exhausted, not even bothering to make nests. Every one of them wanting nothing more than to be back in the forest they had left so long ago.

Now here it was at last.

And as Stripestar's gaze fell on the distant moor where WindClan had made their home for so many generations, something stirred deep within him. Something he hadn't felt in longer than he cared to remember.

What if Galestar and the kits really did survive? What if they returned home without their Clan? And what if they could be a family once again?

It felt so unfamiliar. So fragile.

Hope.

He took a step forward, feeling his heart lift. It was a step into his future. A future that he hadn't thought to hope for . . . and hardly dared to now.

CHAPTER 29

"Now!" barked Bound Hunt. "Pounce!"

With a wild battle cry, Fog Nuzzle leaped from the fallen log, claws raking the air, teeth bared. "Rrrraaaaaggghh!" But her hind paw hit the ground too soon. She tripped, stumbled, went head over tail through the leaf litter, and bumped up against a tree trunk, groaning.

The small rock that stood in for an enemy remained unscathed.

Watching from the shade beneath a young beech tree, Galestar winced. She cast a furtive glance at the other trainees, lined up and waiting for their turn. Her own kits—though they were hardly kits anymore—were stifling snorts of laughter. But to Galestar's surprise, the two young wildcats just looked on placidly, unbothered. Both Flutter Sneeze and Wiggle Leap were as big as Galestar herself, and so far they had executed the move flawlessly every time. But still, they didn't mock Fog Nuzzle for her failure. They just waited patiently for her next attempt.

"I *hate* this!" Fog Nuzzle whined, as she scrambled to her paws. "I can't do it!"

"You couldn't do it the *first time*," Bound Hunt gently corrected her. "Neither could I. In fact, when I first tried that move, I nearly took my teacher's ear off!"

"Really?" Fog Nuzzle looked doubtful.

"Oh yes. I gave her a terrible fright. After that, she wouldn't train me without doing this." Bound Hunt sat back on his haunches, making a worried face and covering both ears with his forepaws.

"She didn't!" Fog Nuzzle's eyes sparkled with curiosity and amusement.

"Now, try it again from here." Bound Hunt padded to the fallen log and pointed to a knot lower down. "It will be better for your size."

Fired up again, Fog Nuzzle clambered onto the log. And when Bound Hunt gave the command, she flew through the air straight and true, snatched up the rock, and rolled with it once, twice, before pinning it firmly to the ground.

"Yes!" Fog Nuzzle yowled. She leaped again, spun, and scampered over to the shade. "Did you see that, Gale Rise? Did you see what I did?"

"I saw it," Galestar assured her, touching noses with Fog Nuzzle. Her heart warmed to see her kit so proud of herself.

As Fog Nuzzle trotted back to join the line, Galestar watched Bound Hunt calmly set the rock back in place and call the next trainee forward. "Pebble Lunge! Your turn . . ."

Things were so different here among the wildcats. Would she ever get used to it? No living mentor assigned to every cat, like in the Clans. Instead, the wildcats trained their young in

these small groups, with different adults teaching them different skills.

It made so much sense, though . . . and there was no denying that it worked. Galestar had already been impressed by how her kits pulled together with the wildcats as they trained. And how Flutter Sneeze and Wiggle Leap looked out for her kits, helped them to their paws when they fell, and nudged them gently onward when they were nervous.

It's like they're not becoming individual warriors, she thought. *But part of something bigger. Part of a Clan.*

Except this wasn't a Clan. It wasn't StormClan or even WindClan.

Galestar sighed as the familiar doubts came scudding like dark clouds to block the sun. She and her kits had stayed with the wildcats for several moons. Leaf-fall was slowly turning into leaf-bare. Were they wildcats themselves now? She didn't know.

I still feel like Galestar.

But the Galestar she had always been had lost her mate. Lost her Clan. *So what future does she have?*

Above all, that Galestar had been in love with Stripestar. *Always.*

The thought troubled her much more than it should have as she watched Bound Hunt prowling through the clearing and training her kits. Caring for them.

As though they were his.

It was past sunhigh when Galestar and Bound Hunt set out together through the woods in search of prey. They had left

the kits back at the camp, learning stalking with Whisper Groom.

The air was unseasonably warm, with pale shafts of sunlight breaking the clouds and spearing down through the branches of the beech trees. Galestar breathed deep and caught a scent she'd not smelled in a long while. A delicious scent that made her mouth water and her belly rumble.

"Vole!" she exclaimed. "I didn't know they lived in these woods."

"Oh yes," Bound Hunt replied, licking his lips. "My favorite."

"Mine too. Though they were scarce on the moor," Galestar murmured. "But so plump. So juicy! Perhaps one day I'll taste those voles again. Shall we?"

She lowered her head, ready to set off in pursuit of the scent trail. But Bound Hunt made no move to follow.

"What's the matter?" she asked, puzzled.

Bound Hunt sat. "Nothing. We will catch this vole for you. I swear it." Then he cocked his head and looked at her. "But first, I must ask you something."

"Anything." Galestar turned to face him.

"Often, you speak like this. 'One day, when I am back on the moor . . .' 'When we return to the forest . . .' 'When I am back home . . .' I need to know—do you mean it?"

"I . . . don't understand."

"Do you really intend to go back there?"

Of course, she almost told him. But she found herself hesitating. She thought of how honest he was, always. She owed him the same in return.

"I . . . don't know," she murmured. She didn't realize how true it was until the words were spoken. "The Clans are all I've ever known. It's hard to imagine . . . anything else," she finished awkwardly.

Bound Hunt nodded, satisfied. "I understand," he told her. "I have been wondering. Because on the one paw, your kits seem so happy here. They are learning the ways of the wildcats. When we visit the hollow tree, our ancestors speak to them as though they were wildcats themselves. I know Rise Stretch speaks to you too."

Galestar dipped her head—it was true.

"And yet, on the other paw . . . you do not use your wildcat name. A beautiful name—Gale Rise. It makes me worry . . . that you do not feel at home here."

"I *do* feel at home," Galestar replied at once. "More than I ever dreamed I might. But . . . it's complicated."

"How so?"

Galestar pondered a while. "Things are different among the wildcats," she offered at last. "In the forest, for example, cats share tongues alike, whether they are she-cats or toms. But here, it seems it is up to the she-cats to groom every other cat. Why is that?"

Bound Hunt's whiskers twitched with amusement. "I cannot say," he admitted. "I suppose . . . I have never thought about it. I could certainly practice my grooming." He lowered his head and licked down a tuft of fur that stuck up on his flank. "There? Did I do well?"

Galestar snorted. "It's a start."

"And we must all start somewhere." Bound Hunt gazed deeply into Galestar's eyes. "You should tell us, Galestar, if something bothers you. That is the wildcat way. We can change. All of us. We do not believe *our* way to be the only one—or the best."

"I like the wildcat way," Galestar murmured.

"Then you are one of us," Bound Hunt told her. "For as long as you wish. Now come on!" he sprang to his paws. "Let's catch you a nice, plump vole!"

Galestar's limbs were buzzing with a pleasant tiredness as she and Bound Hunt padded back through the grassy meadow toward the woods where the wildcats had made their camp. Bound Hunt carried a big hare limp in his mouth, while her own jaws were clamped firmly around the pair of voles she had caught. The time had flown by. Now the sun dipped low, turning the trees gold and throwing long, dark shadows across the grass.

"Galestar!"

She would have recognized the joyful little cry anywhere. And sure enough, Pebble Lunge came haring from the woods, his sleek tabby pelt flickering in and out of view in the long grass. He was supposed to be with his siblings, tending to the elders, as wildcat kits did at the end of the day. Even so, her heart lifted. *He must have smelled us coming,* she thought proudly. *He'll make a fine hunter soon enough.*

To her surprise, Bound Hunt dropped the hare and stiffened.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

The wildcat jolted forward without a reply, his big strong legs eating up the ground as he raced toward Pebble Lunge. "Back!" he yowled. "Get back among the trees!"

What the . . . ? Panic flooded Galestar's body. She didn't know what the matter was, but Bound Hunt's alarm was obvious.

Then a shadow flitted over them, sending a shiver through her from head to tail-tip. She glanced upward, and her fur stood on end. "Pebble Lunge!" she screamed.

Pebble Lunge skidded to a halt, still a few fox-lengths off. His eyes went wide as he glanced up too. *No!* Hopelessly, Galestar lurched forward. But it was too late.

With a *whumph* of displaced air, the eagle swooped.

It was vast and horrifying. Its huge wings folded as it came down like a thunderbolt, hooked beak flashing in the sun. And just as Galestar thought it would snatch up the kit and bear it away, like she had seen once before on the awful mountainside when they had lost poor Rainkit, Bound Hunt slammed straight into it.

He must have hit the eagle hard with his shoulder, because the pair went rolling in the grass, a confusion of feathers and fur, growling and squawking and spitting in a frenzy.

Pebble Lunge stood frozen, staring in horror. Pushing as hard as she could, Galestar dived in front of him, putting herself firmly between the kit and the fight. But her eyes were fixed on Bound Hunt now, and her heart was pounding. *By all the stars, if any ancestor is listening, please don't let him die. . . .* The thought took her by surprise with its urgency. With the feeling of pure terror that accompanied it.

A piercing cry split the air. Galestar saw two more wildcats

surge out of the woods, bounding toward the eagle. They fell upon it in a blur of tabby pelts, hissing and scratching and clawing savagely at the bird along with Bound Hunt.

"Kill it, Bound Hunt!" squealed a familiar voice from the line of trees. *Fog Nuzzle.* She and Thrush Roll had appeared there now, along with some of the elders, all watching wide-eyed.

The eagle was slashing wildly with its talons. But it was moving weakly and slowing, too. The wildcats had managed to pinion its wings to its sides. Now they forced the great bird down into the dirt, clambering on top of it, stamping it down and raking with their claws, ripping with their teeth. Feathers fluttered on the breeze. Galestar caught the scent of blood.

Slowly, gradually, she felt her heart rate slow. *It's over,* she realized. *It's done. We're safe.* The sheer relief . . . It was like drinking cool water on a hot greenleaf day. And she couldn't help but think of all the terrible tragedies that had befallen her while she was with StormClan. One after another. *But not today.* It felt like something had changed. As though spirits were watching over her at last.

It felt like a new beginning.

"Pebble Lunge!" Bound Hunt's voice was deep and rumbling with anger as he left his companions to the eagle and stalked toward Galestar and her kit. Pebble Lunge quailed, dodging behind his mother.

"Listen to me!" snapped Bound Hunt. "Listen closely!" To Galestar's surprise, the wildcat was trembling with rage. "You *know* not to run across the meadow alone! We have told you

that before! It's too dangerous for young kits, especially smallcats like you. Don't you see? You could have . . . You could have been . . ." He broke off, his eyes glimmering, overcome with emotion.

"I'm sorry," Pebble Lunge whimpered. "I'm so sorry, Bound Hunt. I . . . I forgot . . ."

"I know. I know." And then, to Galestar's astonishment, Bound Hunt was nuzzling the young kit, touching noses and rubbing flanks, while Pebble Lunge snuggled close to him in apology. "I am sorry too," murmured Bound Hunt, much calmer now. "I only want you to be safe."

Galestar watched, dumbfounded. *They love each other,* she realized with a jolt. But of course they did. She only wondered that she hadn't seen it sooner.

And now she wondered if there was something else that she wasn't seeing.

My heart is with Stripestar. That was what she had told Bound Hunt, that day on the shore.

But is it still?

Chapter 30

The morning had dawned clear and cold, the pale sunshine offering little warmth as Stripestar led the cats of ThunderClan down the slopes of Highstones and along the edge of the empty Thunderpath. They went in single file, padding through crisp, frosty grass, their every breath puffing out like smoke in the chill of early leaf-bare.

Last night the moon had been a mere sliver in the sky, and the cats had stayed up late debating what to do next. Tinyclaw had urged caution, insisting that they ought to ask StarClan's blessing before going any further. Tumbletail had scoffed at that. *We should take back our territory now,* he'd insisted. *Fight for what's ours.*

Stripestar had stayed quiet through it all. It was strange to think how confident he had once been—how sure of the right path and how quick to decide. Now every possibility seemed to have advantages and disadvantages, and nothing seemed certain.

In the end, Whitestep had suggested a compromise that every cat could agree upon. They would scout out the territories and try to learn what had happened in the forest. Then they would go to the Moonstone to speak with StarClan.

As they journeyed on, Stripestar couldn't stop himself from glancing across the Thunderpath to the gorse and the heather that grew wild at the edge of the moor. The hope still fluttered in his heart, as delicate as a butterfly. *What if they're alive? What if they've come home?* He knew he ought to crush it. But what else was there to keep him going?

"ShadowClan!" hissed Frecklepelt, startling Stripestar from his thoughts. "I smell them."

Stripestar's neck fur bristled. "Be ready," he warned. "We don't know how friendly they'll be."

Up ahead, the bushes rustled and three warriors came slinking from the undergrowth, bellies low to the ground as they fanned out, fixing Stripestar and the others with suspicious glares. Stripestar recognized Graytail, one of the older ShadowClan warriors, but the other two were younger and unknown to him. They must have been apprentices, or even kits, when StormClan left the forest so many moons ago.

"Strangers! What brings you to ShadowClan territory?" Graytail demanded. Then his eyes widened as he recognized them. He sat back, cocking his head in disbelief. "Stripestar?" he breathed. "Is that really you?"

Stripestar nodded. "We've returned."

"May we speak with Snakestar?" asked Tinyclaw.

The ShadowClan cats exchanged glances.

"I'm afraid not," Graytail replied. "Snakestar is at Fourtrees. There is a Gathering today. All these cats come back at once . . . and now you! Snakestar and Birchstar are discussing what's to be done with them."

All these cats . . . Stripestar's heart leaped, in spite of himself.

Did Graytail mean the WindClan cats who had left them on their way back to the forest? Or did he mean some other cats?

"To Fourtrees, then," Stripestar muttered. Then he remembered himself and turned to his old Clanmates. "If you think so?"

To his relief, the cats all murmured their agreement.

It gave Stripestar a shiver of sadness to see those four familiar great oaks once again, rising still, black and stark against a pale sky. The last time he had come to this place, he had been the proud leader of a noble Clan. Now . . . now he didn't know *what* he was.

As he and his companions approached across the hard, frosty ground, the fierce growls of quarreling cats carried to them on the breeze. They nosed through the bushes, treading lightly as they crept cautiously down the slopes and into the hollow.

Cats were milling everywhere, a shifting mass of pelts as the warriors prowled, sizing each other up.

". . . but what does that matter?" some cat was snarling. "You left your territory!"

"Exactly!" spat another. "*Our* territory! As it always has been, for generations!"

"And yet you had no use for it. . . . Why shouldn't we take it for ourselves?"

While the argument raged, Stripestar swept his gaze around the Gathering. Birchstar and Snakestar sat high on the Great Rock, silent and aloof as they listened to the squabble

below. It was strange to see them alone up there—almost as strange as it felt to be down here among the other cats. *A forest with only two Clans.* At least until now. The old leaders both looked much the same, if a little leaner, a little whiter around the muzzle.

But Stripestar wasn't interested in them.

In the clearing below, he spotted the WindClan cats who had abandoned StormClan, huddling together defensively. *Goldenleaf . . . Icefoot . . . Peaktail . . .* He counted them off, identifying every one of them. Each cat who had left in the night. Each cat who had abandoned him.

He peered around at the warriors of ShadowClan and those of RiverClan. Among them, he saw cats he recognized, whom StormClan had left behind when they first left the forest. His gaze fell on Grassfoot, his own littermate. *He's gone over to ShadowClan?* Stripestar couldn't fathom how that might have happened. But right now he didn't care.

He only cared to see one cat. And the more he looked, the more certain he became.

She's not here.

He sank back to his haunches, broken. He'd known it all along. Of course he had. He'd never *truly* believed that she had made her way back to the forest. How could he have? It was just another of his foolish dreams.

So why does it hurt so much?

Slowly, Stripestar became aware of the quiet that had descended in the clearing. The eyes upon him. The assembled cats, all staring in stunned silence at the newcomers.

Tinyclaw nudged Stripestar gently. But he couldn't speak. He could barely raise his head to face the Gathering.

"We see that WindClan has returned to the forest," Tinyclaw declared when no other cat spoke. "Well . . . so has ThunderClan."

The silence stretched out, heavy in the air. Until Birchstar leaned forward, curling her lip with spite. "*WindClan? ThunderClan?* Why, I don't recall any such Clans!" she sneered. "Although, come to think of it, I do have a memory of a . . . what was it? A *StormClan?* And what became of them, I wonder?"

Glancing up, Stripestar saw shame in the hanging heads of his companions—and on the faces of WindClan too. And despite his misery, he felt a strange, manic energy spreading through his body. *They don't deserve this. None of them.*

"No cat is to blame," he cried in a loud, clear voice. "No cat but me." He drew himself up, sitting as tall as he could. "All the pain . . . All the suffering . . . I caused it, and I alone. I made a terrible mistake. StormClan was a disaster. We never found a home for ourselves. We never truly became one Clan, and I should never have tried to make it so. Now we beg our fellow Clans to receive us back as ThunderClan and WindClan. Just as it has always been. As for myself . . . I will suffer any punishment that any cat, or StarClan, thinks fitting."

Looking around, he saw bafflement. Sadness. Anger too—mostly from the WindClan cats. *But no pity, thank StarClan.* He wasn't worthy of that.

"I . . . am puzzled," admitted Snakestar. "StormClan had two leaders, if I'm not mistaken. Where is Galestar?"

"We deserted her. When she needed us the most."

Stripestar looked up sharply. It was Goldenleaf who had spoken, though she seemed too ashamed to meet any cat's eyes. "We lost her in a storm. We left her and her kits—*Stripestar's* kits—behind. Only StarClan knows where they are now."

"Dead, most likely," muttered Tumbletail.

A long, keening wail rose up. Stripestar's heart cracked all over again when he saw who had made the noise. Galestar's littermate, Crowflight, had collapsed among the cats of RiverClan, shuddering with grief, while two of the old WindClan elders tried to comfort her. *She warned us,* he remembered. *She knew it was a bad idea right from the beginning.*

"My decision," Stripestar declared. "No other cat's. And I will bear the pain of it for all my moons."

The Gathering erupted with yet more furious yowls.

"You were her mate!"

"Did you care for her at all?"

"How could you have left her, Stripestar? How could you have left your family?"

Stripestar bowed his head and endured it all. Their hatred didn't hurt because Stripestar hated himself already. He was a rat. He was a worm. He was nothing.

"Banish me," he yowled when quiet fell at last. "I will be a loner for the rest of my days. But first, allow me one last thing. Let me plead with StarClan on behalf of WindClan

and ThunderClan—the Clans I destroyed with my folly. Give me a chance to make things right again, as best I can."

An uneasy silence followed.

"It's not so simple," growled Birchstar. "ShadowClan has taken the moor. RiverClan has taken the woods. Why should we have to give them back?"

"*I* will speak for ShadowClan," purred Snakestar with an irritable flick of his tail. "And we might be persuaded to give *some* territory back to WindClan."

"Well, *we* might not," Birchstar interjected. "Perhaps you have forgotten how this all began? With WindClan and ThunderClan joining forces to take Sunningrocks from RiverClan! But Sunningrocks is ours now, as is right. And why should we give *anything* to the fox-hearts who stole it from us?"

A disquiet spread through the clearing, cats hissing and whispering angrily to each other . . . until Shineflower, RiverClan's medicine cat, held up her tail and the Gathering fell silent.

"Snakestar. Birchstar. At the last full moon, I told you of my vision, did I not?"

Reluctantly, the two leaders nodded.

"I foresaw that StormClan was over, and that its survivors would return," the pale yellow medicine cat announced to the whole hollow. "But StarClan gave me another message that night. They warned that no living cat should decide the fate of these stragglers. The decision rests with StarClan."

"Very well, then," Birchstar grunted. "Let them decide.

On the next clear night, the medicine cats will journey to the Moonstone. Then we will have our answer."

Stripestar knew it was the best they could have hoped for. Still, his pelt prickled with anxiety.

How will StarClan judge us?

CHAPTER 31

A low hum filled the clearing, like the lazy buzzing of a hive full of bees.

Galestar joined her voice to those of the wildcats, her purr mingling with the others so that the endless drone went thrumming right through her, and she could feel it in her belly as much as in her tingling fur.

They all lay flat in a circle around the hollow rowan tree, facing inward with their heads resting on their forepaws. Galestar felt light-headed with contentment. She felt . . . *connected* to her companions in a way she never had before, with any cat.

When she had first come to this place, Galestar had found the skeletal tree almost sinister, gleaming with silver moonlight. But now, at sunhigh, its branches seemed to reach over the wildcats' heads in protection. The sweet scents of lavender and rosemary filled Galestar's nostrils, wafting from the plants that she and the wildcats had gathered that morning and heaped high around the base of the tree trunk, in honor of the new warriors.

Not warriors—prowlers! she reminded herself. Another little difference between the wildcats and the Clans.

At long last, a group of cats stepped out in front of the hollow tree, and the purring fell silent. Galestar's chest swelled with pride to see her kits sitting in a line along with the young wildcats Flutter Sneeze and Wiggle Leap. *They're so much smaller than the others!* she thought, gazing lovingly at her kits. But each had an elder standing behind them as a guardian just the same.

"On this day, we welcome not one but *five* new prowlers!" declared Dream Flow. A murmur of approving purrs spread through the clearing. "Listen well, wildcats and smallcats. And let the words of our ancestors guide your paws until you come at last to the final hunting grounds . . . and beyond."

"And beyond," echoed the assembled wildcats, along with Galestar.

Dream Flow gave a small nod, and Fog Nuzzle, the first of the young cats, turned to face the elder behind her. Galestar's heart warmed as she watched the two of them—elder and young she-cat alike—bow and touch foreheads, their eyes closed.

A silence fell across the clearing. Even the breeze fell away, until there was not even a rustle of leaves as Fog Nuzzle communed with her guide, Nuzzle Hiss.

A moon seemed to pass before Fog Nuzzle let out a soft gasp and jerked up, startled. *It's as though she's woken from a deep sleep,* thought Galestar in wonder.

"Go forth, Fog Nuzzle," announced Dream Flow. "Prowler of the wildcats!"

The wildcats raised their thrumming purr once again, filling the clearing with sound as Fog Nuzzle padded to Galestar with her head held high and lay down at her side.

"What did Nuzzle Hiss tell you?" whispered Galestar as the mingled purr died away.

"I'm sorry, Gale Rise . . . but I cannot say," Fog Nuzzle replied softly. "It was for my ears only."

Galestar pried no further. She could tell from the gleam in her kit's eyes, the proud set of her shoulders, and the pricking of her ears that whatever words the ancestor had offered her had filled her with courage and with confidence. *And that's enough for me,* she thought with happiness.

One by one, the young cats spoke with their guides. Pebble Lunge came to join Galestar, followed by Thrush Roll. Each came away from the elders with a brightness in their eyes and a spring in their step, and Galestar knew that their guides must have offered them the same kindness and wisdom that Fog Nuzzle had surely received.

When it was the turn of the young wildcats to be made prowlers too, Galestar was delighted to see them come trotting over to lie alongside her own kits, flank to flank. Flutter Sneeze even nuzzled Pebble Lunge gently, while Wiggle Leap gave Fog Nuzzle a playful nudge.

They're comrades, Galestar thought.

A sudden rush of emotion took her by surprise. These large, strange cats had taken them in without question. It hadn't mattered that Galestar and her kits didn't look like them. It hadn't mattered that they had different customs. Even so, the wildcats had shown them nothing but kindness and generosity. Her kits were being treated just the same as those of the wildcats. *With acceptance. With love.* And now they were bound together like Clanmates.

No . . . not like Clanmates.

Because now Galestar couldn't help thinking of StormClan. The dream that she and Stripestar had shared, and how different the reality had become. The squabbles and fights that had broken out. The mistrust and dissent that had spread like creepers, strangling and poisoning the vision that had once seemed so pure and so perfect.

So much pain. So much heartache. And for what?

Her life was so much calmer now. So full of peace and belonging. And what a joy it was to realize that she had it at last. The very thing she had been striving for all along.

This was the strongest Clan she had ever been a part of.

And yet it was no Clan at all.

"Galestar. A word?"

She turned to see Dream Flow padding over to her. The ceremony had finished, the wildcats purring happily to each other as they moved through the clearing, some already setting off through the woods back toward their camp. Galestar spotted her own kits walking with Flutter Sneeze and Wiggle Leap, eagerly exchanging stories of their training.

They hardly need me anymore, she thought with a confusing mixture of pride and melancholy.

"What is it?" she asked as Dream Flow settled at her side.

"I can feel your guide Rise Stretch reaching out to me," Dream Flow murmured. "I believe he has a message for you."

Galestar nodded. "Then I will hear it."

Together the she-cats strolled through the trees to a secluded spot beneath the bare boughs of a cedar tree, away

from the other wildcats. Here there was no sound but the twittering of the birds as Dream Flow rested her head on her chest. When she looked up again, it was with the confident, keen gaze of the young tom Rise Stretch.

"You have come so far, Galestar," purred the tom through Dream Flow. "You have experienced joy and suffering. More than enough for any lifetime. Perhaps you believe your journey is done?"

Galestar nodded, trying not to betray the swell of sadness her guide's words brought up in her.

"This is an end," Rise Stretch told her. "Yet it is also a beginning. There is much that lies ahead of you, Galestar. More than you dream of. May I show you?"

"Please."

Galestar leaned forward, closing her eyes as Dream Flow laid a large, soft paw on her forehead.

With a lurch of her stomach, she was somewhere else entirely.

Dizzy, she rose to her paws in the wildcat camp. She felt different. Somehow older, her joints stiff, her body weary. But so calm. So content. More than she had ever felt before.

The future, she realized. *Rise Stretch is showing me my future.*

A mewling drew her attention, and she sank down into the nest where her litter awaited her. Four soft little kits, all snuggling close to her for comfort. *Not so little,* she realized. They were larger than Thrushkit, Pebblekit, and Fogkit had been.

They're part wildcat, she understood.

She couldn't see them, but somehow she could *feel* her

kin looking on with love. Thrush Roll, Pebble Lunge, and Fog Nuzzle, fully grown and brave prowlers, every one. She turned, hoping to catch a glimpse of them, to see how big they had gotten.

But instead she saw some other cat. A shadow stepping toward her, the sun shining from behind, blinding her so that he was only a silhouette with fur that shone gold at the edges.

Just like Stripestar's fur had once shone on a moonlit night at the Gathering.

My mate.

Another lurch of the stomach and—

The vision was gone.

Gasping, Galestar staggered back, felt Dream Flow's paw leave her forehead. She was back in the woods near the hollow tree. "What . . . what *was* that?" she croaked.

Dream Flow blinked. When she opened her eyes Rise Stretch was gone, and she met Galestar's gaze with her own once again. "I cannot say," Dream Flow told her. "But I know this. Rise Stretch cannot show you everything." Her eyes twinkled. "Your future is not carved in stone, smallcat. You must choose a path for yourself."

The moon had risen—a full moon, round and bright and silver, framed in the clear black sky by the swaying branches of the trees that grew around the wildcat camp.

Galestar sat in her nest gazing upward. She knew that somewhere in the far distance, the very same moon shone down on a Gathering at Fourtrees.

And yet, somehow, the forest had never felt so far away.

Her family lay slumbering at her paws, their furry chests rising and falling gently. In their sleep, they still looked like the kits they had been, whom she had nursed and raised and loved every breath of their lives. They had all tired themselves out with a long night of celebration until they barely had the energy to drag themselves back to the nest.

But now they were adults. Soon enough they would have dens of their own.

Mates too, perhaps.

It's time, Galestar decided.

As she slipped out of the nest and padded across the camp, she felt no trepidation. She was so sure that she was doing the right thing. More sure than she had ever been.

Bound Hunt was asleep, lying on his back and pawing at the air. With a snort of amusement, she laid her own paw on his shoulder and shook him gently awake.

"What . . . what's wrong?" mumbled Bound Hunt, blinking and yawning.

"Nothing," Galestar whispered. "Nothing at all. Will you walk with me?"

He rose without question and followed her.

The shadows of the overhanging boughs crisscrossed the silvered leaf litter, as Galestar led Bound Hunt among the trees. The night was cold, sharpening her senses until every crackle of twigs underpaw, every night scent, felt so real it seemed as though she were a kit experiencing them for the very first time.

"Where are we going?" Bound Hunt murmured.

"You'll see."

At last they came to the very edge of the wood, where a boulder lay, worn smooth and flat by the ever-changing seasons. Galestar climbed up and sat on top of it. She waited as Bound Hunt silently took his place next to her. She could feel a tension of uncertainty in his body. *He doesn't know why I've brought him here.* But he would understand soon enough.

"It's . . . beautiful," breathed Bound Hunt.

It was true. With the woods at their backs, the grass sloped down to a sheer drop. And beneath, stretching out into the distance as far as they could see, were the still waters of the endless lake. The moonlight shimmered on its surface, picking out a path of shifting silver water that led all the way to the horizon. *And perhaps beyond that. Perhaps it goes on forever.*

Galestar sighed, long and slow. She felt as though she were letting out all the pain, all the sadness she had endured, in this one quiet moment.

You must choose a path for yourself.

Bound Hunt waited patiently for her to explain. And when at last she was ready, she turned to him.

"Did you know," she purred, "that the moon is very important to the Clans? Every half-moon, our medicine cats meet to commune with our ancestors, just like the wildcats do. Except we call them StarClan."

Bound Hunt made no reply—only listened.

"And at the full moon," Galestar went on, "all the Clans meet beneath four ancient oak trees to share news and to

debate any problems that must be resolved. The Gathering is a special time. An important time. All my life, it has meant a lot to me."

"There is a Gathering tonight," Bound Hunt observed.

"But tonight is different." Galestar hesitated. "Because tonight, for the first time in my life . . . I have no wish to be there."

Bound Hunt tipped his head in puzzlement. "How so?"

"I do not want to be anywhere else in the world, Bound Hunt. Nowhere else but here with you."

She could feel him trembling. She could sense the words he wanted to speak out loud. But she knew that she had turned him away so many times. She knew that it was up to her to speak them.

"I want to be a wildcat," she whispered. "I want my kits to grow old as wildcats. And I want you, Bound Hunt. I want to be your mate."

Slowly, gently, Bound Hunt laid his tail on hers. "I want that too," he murmured. "I have wanted it since the day I met you, Galestar. I want nothing more in the world."

As Galestar gazed deep into his green-brown eyes, so sincere, so full of love, she breathed in the familiar scent of him. The greenleaf grass. The sweetness of strawberries.

All at once, she found herself thinking of another night beneath a full moon, a lifetime ago, when she had shared jokes about the world beyond the forest. *Cats as red as strawberries in greenleaf . . . Cats with giant paws . . .*

And she thought of another tom. A tom with big dreams. A tom she had never been enough for.

Wherever he was, she wished him happiness. But she didn't need him anymore. *Because I am enough for Bound Hunt,* she knew. *I am more than enough.*

"Galestar . . . ," breathed Bound Hunt.

She shook her head.

"Don't call me that," she told him. "Call me by my true name. Call me Gale Rise."

CHAPTER 32

In the cold light of a leaf-bare morning, Stripestar watched two cats approach from his position among the boulders at the edge of the camp. The newcomers were scrawny, flea-bitten specimens, scrambling up the hillside below and shooting nervous, shifty looks at Stripestar.

"Tinyclaw!" he called over his shoulder. "Two more are coming."

The she-cat who had once been his deputy came padding over from her den. A temporary den, like all the others, fashioned from rocks and bare branches on the lower slopes of Highstones. *It's just for now,* Tinyclaw had assured them all after the Gathering. *Just until we know what our future holds.*

This place wasn't much. But ever since the Gathering, Stripestar had volunteered every chance he could to stand guard over the camp. It made him feel useful. And, more importantly, it meant he could be alone. He couldn't face talking to any cat for long.

Not until they had found out what StarClan had planned for them.

"Welcome!" Tinyclaw greeted the strangers as they slunk

into the camp. "I'm so glad you came! ThunderClan could use two strapping warriors like yourselves."

Stripestar held back a snort. The underfed loners looked about as far from *strapping* as he could imagine . . . but he knew that Tinyclaw was only doing all she could to rebuild the Clan.

Every day, Tinyclaw had been making herself busy, seeking out ThunderClan cats who had gone over to other Clans and trying to persuade them to return. She'd had poor luck. So now she had turned to rogues and kittypets, trying to tempt them with promises of a future territory in the forest, rich pickings of prey, and Clanmates to stand by them always.

At least until things get too difficult . . .

Stripestar forced the bitter thought from his mind. StormClan had been nothing but a mistake. He knew that now.

Sometimes he wondered why Tinyclaw had been putting off their visit to the Moonstone. The medicine cats had returned from their visit, saying that StarClan had told them only that they would see the returning cats. But Tinyclaw had delayed, seeming uncertain. Perhaps it was because she wanted to build up ThunderClan first and prove her dedication. *Or perhaps she's just as scared as I am of what StarClan might say.*

"I don't know about this," muttered one of the loners—a mangy ginger she-cat missing half an ear. "We've heard stories about ThunderClan . . . and about their leader." She shot a meaningful look at Stripestar.

"Yes, well, the thing is . . ." Tinyclaw seemed flustered. "Stripestar, er . . . he *was* our leader, but we don't know—we're not sure if—"

"I'm not leader anymore," Stripestar interrupted before Tinyclaw could tie herself up in knots. "So you don't have to worry about that. I'm only here to help. To persuade StarClan to let ThunderClan stay in the forest."

"And what will you do after that?" the she-cat's companion demanded—a shaggy gray tom with piercing green eyes.

Stripestar shrugged. "StarClan alone knows," he muttered, mostly to himself.

"Very well." The she-cat gave Tinyclaw a nod. "We'll be warriors, then. ThunderClan warriors!" She glanced suspiciously at Stripestar. "At least . . . for now."

The moon was high. Deep below the rocky slopes of Highstones, its pure white light flooded the cavern of the Moonstone, illuminating each glittering facet of the massive crystal until it seemed almost to be glowing from within.

Stripestar's pelt prickled as he slunk into the cavern alongside his former Clanmates, silently taking their places around the sacred crystal. It hadn't been easy to convince Tinyclaw that it was time. But now, finally, she had agreed.

The air was icy cold here, in this place that was so familiar yet still so strange to him. But that wasn't what had made him shudder. He could recall only too well his last visit to the Moonstone. The hard words of his ancestors. The cruel, twisting pain he'd felt as he squirmed among the rocks, as his nine lives were ripped away from him, one by one.

On that night he had entered the cavern with such self-belief. *No—arrogance,* he corrected himself. It made him cringe

to think of it now. How foolish he had been. How selfish. Tonight, he swore silently, he would make amends. He would do whatever it took to save the Clan that he had torn apart.

Stripestar looked around at the other cats. *Tinyclaw . . . Whitestep . . . Stoneflower . . .* and more. They were all here—all the ThunderClan cats who remained out of those he had led into the wilderness. Without a word, they each touched their noses to the crystal.

The coldness made Stripestar gasp, even though he'd been prepared for it. It seemed to travel through him, chilling his heart and making him tremble with awe.

"StarClan!" His whisper echoed back at him from the rocks like the hissing of a snake. "We call on you, spirits of our ancestors. I ask nothing for myself. I come here for ThunderClan. I come to beg forgiveness. Not for myself. But for my Clanmates."

His voice echoed and died away into silence.

Nothing. The crystal glittered but no cats appeared.

Stripestar felt a dread begin to gnaw at his stomach. *What if they won't speak with us? What if we are all dead to them?*

"Please . . . I know I deserve nothing from you."

It was easier to find the words here in the dark, where he didn't have to meet the gaze of the cats he'd let down.

"I spurned you when I should have listened. I was a fool, for love of Galestar. I should never have tried to force two Clans together, and I should never have led them out of the forest. But I beg you . . . do not blame these honorable cats for my mistakes. Punish me if you will. I will pay any price. But these

cats only followed the warrior code—they only obeyed their leader. Give them another chance. Let them prove themselves. Let ThunderClan endure without me."

The rocks bounced the words back at him as though in mockery. Once again, a long silence stretched out in the cavern. Stripestar felt his companions growing restless, shooting anxious glances at him and at each other.

Then—a flash of white light, blinding. Stripestar flinched and lurched back from the Moonstone. His heart began to pound. The crystal was glowing brighter now, gleaming and sparkling as though it had come alive.

"And so the wanderers have returned."

The voice boomed off the rocks, resounding in Stripestar's head. *The voice of Thunderstar.* On instinct, he dropped to his belly, dipping his head in submission and in reverence.

All around him, he heard his companions let out soft gasps of wonder, edging back in awe at the presence of their ancestors.

Four cats had appeared, shimmering out of the cold air among them. The very same four cats whom Stripestar had spoken to on that awful night so long ago. They stood calm and still, their pelts glittering with starlight.

Thunderstar fixed his icy gaze on Stripestar. "You dare to show your face here again? You, who were willing to throw away all that I created?"

"Not one Clan destroyed, but two," added Windstar. "My Clan! A Clan you were not even born to."

"They are not destroyed!" cried Stripestar before he could

think better of it. He swallowed hard, mustering all the courage he could. "At least . . . they don't have to be. If you will allow them back, they will rebuild. They will be even stronger than before. Tinyclaw will see to it."

Tinyclaw looked wide-eyed, startled, and overwhelmed. But she stepped forward all the same. "I will," she swore. "I'll do all in my power to make it so."

"And WindClan, too . . . ," added Stripestar, desperately. "They're not beaten. They'll come to beg your forgiveness soon enough. They can make a home on the moor, as they always have, and—"

"And now he presumes to command us!" Shadowstar interrupted. "After all that he has done!"

Stripestar felt panic swirling in his gut. *It's not working! I'm losing them.* He wriggled down among the rocks, flattening his ears and making himself as small as he possibly could.

"I am begging you," he mewed. "But the choice is yours. I know that. You were right from the beginning, and I was wrong. I should have listened, and I should have obeyed. I will carry that with me always. I will remember all the pain I have caused. The deaths that I was responsible for. And the Clans that I nearly brought down through my own folly."

For a few heartbeats, no cat spoke.

This is the end, Stripestar thought. He felt strangely ready for it. It was what he had expected, after all. Now they would send him away, empty-pawed, to be a loner for the rest of his moons. Or they would strike him down, here and now. Stripestar didn't know which would be worse.

"Get up," meowed Riverstar.

Stripestar blinked. He peered up at his ancestors, who all stood, watching him calmly. Slowly, cautiously, he rose to his paws. "I don't . . . understand," he muttered.

"What use can you be groveling in the dirt?" asked Riverstar. "You understand what a terrible thing you have done. Good! Now put it behind you. You owe a great debt to ThunderClan. You cannot pay it off lying on your belly."

"But—but my punishment," stammered Stripestar. "Surely you mean to exile me, at least? Or—"

"You wish to walk away from the mess you have made?" Thunderstar demanded. He gave an angry snort. "No! Now is the time for you to make penance. Show your Clan how dedicated you can be. Work hard every day until your last to repair the damage you have done."

Stripestar dipped his head in assent. "I will do whatever you ask of me. But surely you don't intend me to be the leader of ThunderClan?"

"Of course not!" growled Thunderstar. "But you can find your humility. You can be a strong, loyal warrior. You can serve your Clan like any other cat. Do you understand?"

"I understand." He licked his lips, hardly daring to hope. "Does this mean you'll give ThunderClan your blessing? That we can come back to the forest?"

"On one condition," replied Riverstar. He turned, fixing each cat in turn with a stern gaze. "You must not speak of StormClan. Never again. The very idea of combining Clans and leaving the forest . . . it is too dangerous. It must be stamped out. Never spoken of. Never dreamed of."

A soft murmur of agreement filled the great cavern.

"Forgive me," meowed Tumbletail. "But is that wise?"

Stripestar drew in a sharp breath. *Even here, talking to our most respected ancestors, Tumbletail isn't afraid to speak his mind!* Then again, Stripestar had been like that once himself.

"Explain," Shadowstar demanded.

Tumbletail shrugged. "I only mean . . . it's been such a disaster! If we tell other cats, won't they understand what a bad idea it was? The story of StormClan could be a warning to any cat who'd dream of following in our paw steps."

"No," Thunderstar replied simply. Then a look came over his face, more serious and severe than Stripestar had ever seen before. "Listen to me, cats of ThunderClan. This mistake nearly ended two Clans, but it could have been even worse. It might have ended *all* the Clans. If the story of StormClan is passed down, it will make foolish cats wonder: *Perhaps if things had been done differently . . . perhaps there might be another way . . .* We cannot allow them to even think it."

"It must be forgotten," agreed Windstar. *"Entirely."*

"But you, Stripestar . . ."

The voice of Thunderstar sounded suddenly very close—inside Stripestar's head. He saw that his ancestor was staring at him with an unblinking gaze. And he understood at once that these words were for him, and for him alone.

"Even as the moons pass, you will never forget. It will drive you each day to serve ThunderClan—to keep it independent, and strong. If you should father more kits, they too will feel a pull to protect their Clan no matter what—though they will not understand why. And you will never tell them.

This will be your burden, Stripestar. This will be your punishment."

Stripestar bowed. *I accept it.*

When Thunderstar spoke next, it was to address all the gathered cats. "The Clan will need a new leader," he purred. "Tinyclaw. You served Stripestar well, with great loyalty. But ThunderClan must begin again, like a fresh shoot rising from the earth. The new leader will be Whitestep."

The living cats all turned to stare at the she-cat. Whitestep looked stunned. But she nodded.

As soon as the name was spoken, Stripestar understood that it was the wisest choice. *She's so calm and beloved by every cat,* he thought. *She will bind the Clan together.*

Beyond, he caught sight of Tinyclaw. He could have sworn he saw her shoulders relax a little, as though in relief.

"You have already lost your nine lives," Thunderstar told Stripestar. "But you cannot bear your name any longer. You are a warrior now, and you will take your warrior's name again. And so, *Stripebark* . . . I bid you welcome once more to ThunderClan."

"Thank you," Stripebark mumbled. He felt choked with emotion even to be a part of the Clan that he loved. It was more than he had dared hope for.

"Whitestep," called Thunderstar. "Approach the Moonstone."

Padding forward, Whitestep lay down on her belly with her nose touching the shining white crystal. She closed her eyes.

A tremor seemed to pass through the cavern, and the

white light of the Moonstone spread, engulfing Whitestep, as though she herself were made of crystal. She lay very still, and Stripebark understood that she was experiencing a vision of StarClan, just as he had when he had received his own nine lives.

Thunderstar's voice carried all around the rocky space. "With this life, I give you fealty to ThunderClan," he intoned. "Use it to bind your Clan, to make it one, every cat stronger with their Clanmates than they might ever be apart."

The ceremony continued. Riverstar gave Whitestep her second life, offering good judgment. As he spoke, Stripebark became aware of more starry-pelted cats melting out of the shadows, eyes glinting in the darkness as they looked on in approval at the new leader of ThunderClan.

"With this life, I give you the willingness to fight for others. Use it to protect your Clanmates, and every cat in need." It was a black-and-white cat who spoke, becoming momentarily more substantial, before fading away again.

For a painful moment, Stripebark's heart had lurched at the sight of that pelt. *Galestar!* But no—it was Cloud Spots, the very first medicine cat of ThunderClan.

Gray Wing and Turtle Tail each gave Whitestar a life, along with the ability to bring out the best in her warriors and the determination to stay among the Clans and to recreate the Blazing Star.

Then another pair of cats appeared before them, and Stripebark's breath caught in his throat for a second time.

Kestrelwing . . . and Rosebush!

His heart ached to see the wise medicine cat and his old comrade once again. Cats whose deaths he had caused. He wanted to run to them, to beg their forgiveness. But he knew the last thing he should do was to interrupt the ceremony. So instead he watched sadly as Kestrelwing gifted Whitestep the ability to admit mistakes, and Rosebush promised her the simple gift of courage, before they both slipped away again among the shadows. *As they must.*

Beside the Moonstone, Whitestep shuddered once, in grief, at the disappearance of her mate. But she kept her eyes closed and her nose touching the crystal.

"With this life, I give you loyalty."

That voice . . . Stripebark trembled to see the smoke-gray pelt of his former mate, even more beautiful now with the starlight glittering across it.

"Fogdrift . . . ," he breathed. But if she saw him, she didn't spare him a glance.

One last life left. And as Fogdrift melted away, a young kit with a snow-white pelt appeared in her place.

Stripebark sank back on his haunches, defeated at last. Utterly broken.

It was the kit he had borne on his back up a mountain—the mountain where she had lost her own life, so young. He couldn't bear to see her, and yet he couldn't look away.

"With this life, I give you hope for the future."

Rainkit turned slowly. And to Stripebark's astonishment, she fixed him with her starlit gaze.

"Use it and know that your future is not marked out,"

Rainkit purred. "That there is always a tomorrow. And that there is *always* hope."

In a blaze of light, the shimmering pelts of StarClan vanished, the Moonstone turned dull, and the cat who had been Whitestep jerked awake, blinking in the darkness.

The cold had sunk deep into Stripebark's bones by the time they emerged from Mothermouth onto the barren slope of Highstones. A freezing wind swept across the mountainside, skittering pebbles, flattening their pelts, and making him shiver. The sky was black and pricked with stars, the moon gazing down on a newborn ThunderClan.

Whitestar stepped up on a boulder, and they clustered around her to hear the words of their new leader.

"We have a battle ahead of us," Whitestar told them grimly. "You heard Birchstar at the Gathering. She doesn't believe that we belong here anymore. RiverClan has taken our territory, and they will not give it up without a fight. But we are ThunderClan. And we know how to fight . . . don't we?"

The answering yowls split the cold night air with their sheer excitement—and with their anger. *Yes,* thought Stripebark. *StarClan made the right choice.*

"I will need a deputy," Whitestar continued when the Clan had quietened down. "I choose Tumbletail. Are you ready to serve your Clan?"

The black tom squared his shoulders. "You know I am," he growled.

"Then I say these words before the spirits of StarClan, so

they can hear my choice. Tumbletail will be the new deputy of ThunderClan. Let's go." Whitestar leaped down from the boulder. "Tonight we rest. We gather our strength. Then, tomorrow, at sunrise, we return to the forest. *Our* forest. And we take what's ours!"

Only Stripebark lingered as the cats set off across the slopes of Highstones. He could sense a fresh energy running through the Clan, like sparks of lightning. But he wasn't a part of it. These cats—the new ThunderClan—they were the future.

I'm the past.

He looked back over his shoulder into the yawning darkness of Mothermouth. Among all those shifting starlit pelts, there was one cat he hadn't seen down in the cavern of the Moonstone. And if she wasn't in StarClan . . . perhaps she had survived. Perhaps his kits had survived.

And if *that* was true, what wouldn't he do to find them? To make his family whole again?

"Stripebark?"

Whitestar. She had come back for him, alone. Her eyes glinted in the dark.

"We need you," she told him. "Please . . . will you come with us?"

Stripebark hesitated. He could feel something inside him pulling, urging him to turn away. To leave it all behind and let them go on without him. But he had made a promise, and he was done with bad decisions.

Besides. *There is always hope.*

Silently, Stripebark followed Whitestar into ThunderClan's future.

High up on the glistening wet slab of rock, Whitestar puffed out her chest, threw back her head, and caterwauled into a clear blue sky, "ThunderClaaaaaan!"

Silhouetted there above the clearing, her pelt shone so brightly in the light of sunhigh that Stripebark couldn't look directly at her. *Our beloved leader. Who has led us to victory after victory, season after season, time and time again.*

He raised his voice in answer, along with those of his clanmates.

"ThunderClaaaaaaaaan!"

As the cry died out, the last of the RiverClan warriors were still scurrying off into the shadows beneath the trees, splashing and floundering across the sparkling waters of the river and skulking away up the far bank, dripping and furious.

Sunningrocks are ours again at last!

Stripebark wanted so badly to share the joy of his Clanmates. He knew that ThunderClan was blessed with a leader who was both wise and strong. That under Whitestar, they had recovered nearly all the territory they had lost—even though it had taken so long.

And look at WindClan. . . . Snakestar had not proved as willing to share as he had first suggested, and with Crowstar as their leader, WindClan was still struggling to take back the moor.

Stripebark knew he ought to feel proud of his Clan. But here, on this beautiful greenleaf day, all he could think of was

his own victory. So many moons ago, on a sunny day much like this one. A day when it was *he* who had taken this territory from Birchstar's paws. *He* who had stood high on that rock and received the congratulations of his Clanmates.

He . . . and another cat.

Looking across the riverbank—at the injured warriors limping across the churned-up mud, touching heads with their comrades, or slumped, licking their wounds—his gaze snagged on a black-and-white pelt disappearing among the trees.

His heart jumped into his throat. *Could it be? Is it possible . . . ?*

The cat paused and threw a look over its shoulder. Stripebark recognized him then—a tom, one of the young apprentices of RiverClan.

He hung his head as the RiverClan cat darted off again and was gone. Sitting there, alone amid the bustle of the battlefield, he hardly noticed the cats who moved around him, the meows and groans and battle stories exchanged by excitable apprentices.

In the shimmering surface of the river, he could see himself reflected. His muzzle speckled with white. His eyes dimmed. His whiskers drooping.

When had he grown so old?

He was moving more slowly and more stiffly too. He had survived the battle unscathed—but only because the younger warriors had been so much swifter to the fight. By the time he had joined the fray, it was almost over.

But he knew he should be grateful that he had lived so long.

I miss you, Galestar.

How long had it been since he had heard her name spoken out loud? The rest of the Clan had been as good as their word. Since that night at the Moonstone, they had never mentioned her again, nor the Clan that she and Stripebark had made their own.

Sometimes he wondered if they had forgotten it all completely, just as Riverstar had instructed—as though it had been nothing more than a dream. *And perhaps that's all it ever was.*

He'd had so many dreams when he was young. Glorious dreams! He'd been so sure he would find happiness just over the horizon, if he could just keep going, just keep reaching . . .

I didn't understand that it was there all along.

That you were all I wanted.

Not until it was too late.

Sometimes . . . he wished he *could* forget.

Releasing his claws, Stripebark scratched briefly in the mud of the riverbank. A jagged line, like a bolt of lightning, crossed with straight lines for the gusts of wind. The mark that Goldenleaf had seen once in a dream. *The mark of StormClan.* The Clan that never was.

I'll never forget you, Galestar, he swore silently. *And I'll never forgive myself for losing you.*

But that was the past, and there was no way back to it.

With one swift movement, Stripebark swiped the mark away.

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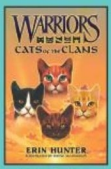

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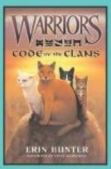

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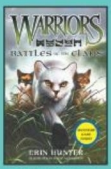

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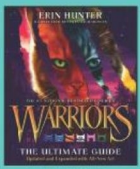

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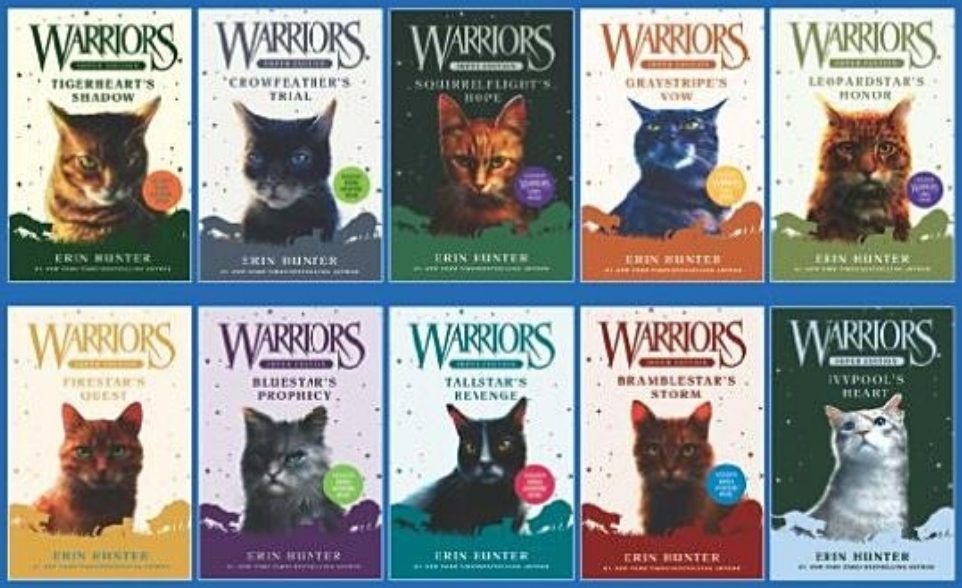

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